



CONSULTATION ON

'Building the evidence to reduce poverty: The UK's policy on independent evaluation for international development' Department for International Development

BOND submission by the Donor - Learning Group March 2009

About BOND

BOND (British Overseas NGOs for Development) is the UK membership body for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in international development. Established in 1993, BOND now has over 340 member organisations, from large organisations with a world-wide presence to smaller, more specialist organisations working in specific regions or with specific groups of people.

About the BOND Donor- Learning Group

This submission has been prepared by the BOND Donor-Learning Group. This subgroup of the BOND Organisational Learning Group has been meeting since early 2007 to explore the effects of donors' accountability and conditionality requirements – including current evaluation practice - on NGOs' ability to learn effectively and improve development practice. The group has looked at how donors might change some of their practices around grant applications, funding and reporting -- and has also examined underlying assumptions about monitoring, evaluation, learning and impact assessment and about how change actually happens.

Since early 2008, the group has been joined by representatives with learning and evaluation roles from Comic Relief, Princess Diana Memorial Fund and Big Lottery Fund.

Organisations that have contributed and endorsed this submission include:

ActionAid
Childhope UK
Christian Aid
HelpAged International
International Childcare Trust
Plan International
Practical Action
Skillshare International
War Child
WaterAid
WOMANKIND Worldwide
WWF- UK

Summary

BOND and its members, welcome this opportunity to contribute to the consultation on DFID's new policy on independent evaluation for international development. We believe that the fact that DFID is developing a policy on evaluation is a very positive step which will strengthen the work of DFID and its partners' work.

At the same time, we have concerns in regard to DFID's approach to evaluations in general as well as to some specifics of this new policy. In the following submission, we would like to draw DFID's attention to some key areas for improving the draft policy and DFID's overall approach to evaluations. We would be very happy to discuss the issues raised in this submission further with DFID.

Executive Summary of Recommendations to DFID:

In our response to the consultation we aim to:

- a. Make some general points based on our experience and extensive conversations in the BOND Donor-Learning group about change, learning and evaluation.
- b. Express some specific concerns about the current Chapter 4 on 'A culture of learning across DFID'
- c. Respond to DFID's consultation questions.

In summary, the recommendations we are offering to DFID are:

- Consider what kind of information and learning would really benefit and improve DFID's work.
- Improve how learning is integrated into evaluation by, firstly, developing an understanding what evaluation is, and, secondly, developing an understanding of what learning is. DFID's policy needs to be enhanced by a rigorous understanding of how learning and change actually happen.
- Allow flexible funding to integrate learning into programmes around what organisations and communities are trying to change together, rather than relying on mid or end-term evaluation.
- Aim for in-depth investigation, thoughtful reflection and honest interpretation rather than "objectivity".
- Recognise that evaluation of effectiveness should investigate changes for different groups of stakeholders and changes to the relationships between them.

- Develop a genuine culture of learning and make use of a range of rigorous evaluation methods and enable other stakeholders to do the same.
- Support better accountability to citizens and civil society in the Global South.
- Develop understanding contexts, creating links and coalitions and communicating credible knowledge to improve learning from evaluation.
- Involve those who are to be influenced by evaluation findings in the evaluation process itself, which will lead to greater use of recommendations and learning than currently occurs as a result of evaluations.
- Encourage evaluators to take account of the views of people of both gender, of all ages (including children, youth and elderly), of varying abilities and different identities when undertaking evaluations.
- Evaluative processes that involve people in the process of evaluation in a way that they both learn and can hold aid practitioners to account.

1. DFID's approach to evaluation, learning and change

We would like to share some overall points of feedback and concern about DFID's wider policy and underlying assumptions about evaluation, learning and change.

It is our conviction that evaluation in the development sector suffers generally from the following problems:

- The word evaluation is an umbrella term for a range of different mechanisms, including learning and measurement of impact. Processes for effective learning are essentially different from those for effective measurement of impact. The danger is that both learning and impact assessment are assumed to fall under the heading of "evaluation" or "monitoring and evaluation".
- In fact, even when evaluations make a nod in the direction of learning, they are rarely of much use for learning – mainly because the "genre" of evaluation as it is generally practiced is inherently unsuitable for learning to occur. There is widespread dissatisfaction in the sector with the role and usefulness of evaluations. Evaluations are often seen as merely PR exercises that lack the kind of rigour, reflection or learning that is required for improving management, policies and practices. The CEO of a large NGO told us he had never read an evaluation that was of any use whatsoever.
- Evaluations are typically a written report, produced at the end of a project or a programme, by an external or 'independent evaluator'. They are often aligned to the logframe or to baseline indicators, which attempt to measure (a) what the conditions were at the start of a project and (b) what precise activities were planned in the project as well as the measurable ways (indicators) in which progress on the project could be assessed. Evaluations attempt to measure whether a project's objectives were achieved and if not why so. However, systems oriented to the measurement of data and evidence cannot in themselves facilitate effective learning.

The principles of complexity theory¹ suggest, however, that it is not possible to predict change accurately in advance. The delivery of projects is in fact dependent on an unpredictable and highly complex interweaving of internal and external conditions and relationships over very few of which do project managers or programme officers have any control. That means that evaluation cannot be based on principles of attribution but rather on those of contribution.

If we accept the non-linear approach to understanding change more emphasis needs to be given to learning and reflection primarily on the changing context and on the relationships between various development actors and the power issues underlying them.

We recognise that ‘technical’ evaluations that typically use more experimental approaches can be of great value for learning about what technical solutions do or do not work, for example, the effectiveness of a certain drug or the impact of a new curriculum on (pre-defined) learning outcomes. However, this sort of evaluation by itself is not always adequate for understanding the wider impact of development for two principle reasons: a) as explained above development is very contextual, not-linear and is underpinned by a great amount of internal politics and power issues and b) the aims of development are varied and multiple and the evaluation of some of these – such as empowerment, participation, civil society strengthening do not lend themselves to experimental design.

Practice on the ground will only improve, develop and change if programme staff, partners and beneficiaries together engage in effective learning conversations, in which the quality of conversational process is seen as more important than the extraction of information and/or the production of a written report. It is also self-evident that power and funding issues can inhibit a quality learning process or conversation from taking place.

Finally, there is also the issue of relevance of learning to different stakeholders and different levels of the development structure. Currently, the majority of evaluations think of learning as **product** i.e. information that is extracted from a body of work and is sent up the development chain. Our group’s approach to evaluation implies that learning is a **process** which primarily benefits and remains at the level at which it is carried out - amongst the people who are engaged in the process- and maybe one level above it. But further up it goes it loses its meaning and momentum as it is hard to be translated and rarely leads to change.

2. A culture of learning across DFID (Chapter 4)

- We were pleased to see that there is a chapter dedicated to DFID’s culture of learning. We were however disappointed with its content as it does not demonstrate in-depth knowledge of current discussions or studies on organisational culture and learning.

¹ Cf. for example ‘Exploring the science of complexity: Ideas and implications for development and humanitarian efforts’, Ben Ramalingam and Harry Jones with Toussaint Reba and John Young <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/odi-publications/working-papers/285-science-complexity.pdf>

- Moreover, the chapter is not clear about how DFID as an institution will be committed to organisational learning. How does the phrase ‘across DFID’ translate into practice?
- Neither does the chapter describe what kind of processes need to be in place within DFID to enhance or facilitate this learning culture. We would encourage DFID to establish processes such as collaborative cross-departmental learning reviews, peer learning and facilitated learning conversations across different levels and units within DFID.
- We welcome DFID’s intention to ensure that lessons learnt from evaluations are fed into policy and programming. However, we believe that this cannot simply be done by “gathering, synthesising and centralising information” and by creating information systems. If learning is a process which leads to change, DFID needs to think through precisely how evaluation can facilitate learning and exactly how this will lead to changes in policy and programming.
- A learning culture is a reflective and adaptive one. We would like to encourage DFID to reflect on what that will mean for its wider work, processes and culture.
- We would be very interested in the initiatives that DFID senior management is prepared to take to increase their own development and practice with regard to learning.

3. Independence in evaluation (*consultation question 1*)

The draft document states that evaluation should be independent, objective, trustworthy and credible (p.12) and accurate and impartial (p.22). ‘Independent’ evaluation, in the sense of freeing the process from vested interests as much as possible, is clearly important. It means ensuring that the evaluators are able to draw conclusions in response to DFID’s broad remit (poverty reduction) rather than the interests of particular staff or departments. This is already recognized and has led to various useful arrangements: recruiting external evaluators, safeguarding the autonomy of the Evaluation Department from other DFID departments, the reporting of the Head of Evaluation to the DG Corporate Performance (and possibly the Permanent Secretary in the future), and the work of the ‘Independent Advisory Committee on Development Impact’.

However, other aspects of independence - in the sense of impartiality and objectivity - are contestable. Evaluations always involve judgment and opinion. Whatever the evaluators’ relationship with a project, staff or a country (i.e., even if they are completely new to all three and ‘external’) they come to the task with their assumptions and theories about development and the issues concerned. For this reason it is possible to aim for credible and convincing evaluations that rely on in-depth investigation, thoughtful reflection and interpretation or explanation that incorporate honesty about partiality. But it is impossible to be neutral, impartial or independent in the sense of coming to a task with no subjectivity, presuppositions or theories.

Recommendation:

- Aim for in-depth investigation, thoughtful reflection and honest interpretation rather than ‘objectivity’

4. Quality and effectiveness as principles in evaluations (*consultation question 2*)

Quality and effectiveness definitions:

The way that quality and effectiveness have been framed in much development debate is problematic. On page 20, effectiveness is defined as 'a measure of the extent to which an aid activity attains its objectives.' There are several reasons why this definition is far too narrow:

- Project objectives are often designed by a sample of stakeholders. As a programme develops, and more stakeholders get involved, the objectives will inevitably change if there is any commitment to stakeholder-driven development;
- For an initiative to be effective, objectives will change for other reasons too – because circumstances, priorities and opportunities change;
- The way that original and new objectives are met should also be part of an evaluation. If met in a way that caused harm to others, then effectiveness is compromised;
- Any activity will create benefits and disbenefits, winners and losers – evaluation of effectiveness should investigate changes for different groups of stakeholders and changes to the relationships between them.

Effectiveness in the narrow sense in which it is currently conceived also fails to acknowledge that learning is a key component of 'being effective'. Evaluations should not only aim to create learning (about different processes and issues for different stakeholders) but should also seek to examine whether learning is taking place by individuals and groups as a result of the work being carried out. Are development practitioners, recipients of aid and donors learning as they proceed through their work? Only if this is happening continually can aid and development be seen to be effective.

We agree wholeheartedly with the idea of using mixed methods and that attribution poses challenges (p.20). But the response we would advise would **not** be to:

- separate the development intervention from other variables
- design the evaluation at the beginning
- test a conceptual model

This derives from an approach that assumes development is about "doing" development to others; setting targets and expecting "them" to be recipients of aid' (Chapman and Mancini 2008²). Development should be about supporting and engaging with initiatives – with funding, knowledge, collaboration, advocacy and so on – that (in DFID's case) reduce poverty. When seen like that evaluation is not so much a measure of what DFID and its partners have done to others, but more about changes that have come about partly as a result of DFID's engagement with a range of stakeholders.

As an alternative or complement to 'experimental' or scientific methods of evaluation, evaluation could take the form of 'accompaniment', where those whose work is being

² Jennifer Chapman and Antonella Mancini, 2008, 'Impact Assessment: Drivers, dilemmas and deliberations'. Prepared for Sightsavers International, accessed on 8th January 2009, <http://www.sightsavers.org/Who%20We%20Are/About%20Us/Downloads/World7869.html>

evaluated are facilitated through a process of reflection that allows them to change their attitudes, beliefs and practices. This would create a stronger culture of learning (by those who are implementing programmes or developing/implementing policies) and change would happen through the process of evaluating rather than be the result – usually framed as a list of recommendations - of it.

Purpose and principles of evaluation:

There is also a question about the purpose of evaluations; what gets evaluated and why? Traditionally evaluations seek to examine ‘results’ with far less attention being paid to the processes that help or hinder results from being achieved. Critically there seems to be little appetite for examining how relationships between stakeholders are affected by/affect development processes and outcomes. There is much greater need to look critically at the internal working of institutions and how power is used/works within these in order to better understand and learn about what sorts of structures, processes, mechanisms and relationships are more likely to lead to positive results as viewed by those different individuals and groups who are supposed to benefit from aid.

Quality is often talked about as adhering to international standards and guidance – suggesting a narrow focus on the types of evaluations that might get conducted. Internationally recognized standards apply mainly to more scientific or experimental approaches to evaluation – which whilst valuable in many instances – are not always relevant or appropriate. Experimental methods (e.g., randomized control trials) may be useful in some contexts where it is possible to isolate certain variables; qualitative research to elicit and present evaluations from a range of stakeholders may be more appropriate in other instances, while in many cases quality evaluation will depend on the development of organisational learning with key principles. This is the case for an NGO, a network, a government department or any entity. Principles guiding evaluation might include, as examples:

- understanding contexts
- clarity on why knowledge is needed and for whom
- user friendly knowledge systems
- disaggregating data
- culture of learning, critical reflection and transparency, which includes involving those who need to ‘learn’ in the process of evaluation
- linking with other evaluations
- using existing data where possible
- feedback loops
- accountability to stakeholders at all levels³

DFID is advised to develop a culture of learning and make use of a range of rigorous evaluation methods, but also to enable others to do the same. For example, in its civil society funding schemes greater demands and support for accountability might be prioritized by DFID. While Southern governments and CSOs are the primary actors in being accountable to their citizens and interest groups in the Global South, Northern CSOs funded by DFID should give far more attention to rigorous methods of accounting to their South-based partner organisations. (For ideas about accountability to ‘beneficiaries’ see BOND, 2006, A BOND approach to quality in Non-Governmental Organisations: putting

³ Ibid. See also BOND, ‘Working with barriers to organisational learning’, 2006.

beneficiaries first, Keystone and Accountability, and for accountability to Southern partners contact Eleanor Cozens, formerly of Sightsavers).

Recommendations:

- Recognise that evaluation of effectiveness should investigate changes for different groups of stakeholders and changes to the relationships between them
- Develop a culture of learning and make use of a range of rigorous evaluation methods, but also to enable others to do the same
- Support better accountability to citizens and also to civil society in the Global South

5. Learning from evaluations to inform policy (*consultation question 4*)

Overseas Development Institute has undertaken useful work on how to improve links between research/evaluation, policy and practice (partly funded by DFID).⁴ Three aspects are key:

- Understanding contexts: whether political contestation, institutional pressures or vested interests, it is important to fully understand the context before developing strategies for creating incentives, overcoming barriers and working collaboratively.
- Creating links: the right relationships, networks and ‘insider advocates’ are needed to make sure that learning and research get communicated, believed and used.
- Communicating credible knowledge: conveying ideas effectively depends on good timing, relevance to other people’s concerns, and ensuring recommendations are applicable and convincing. Continuous interaction between actors who trust each other is often more fruitful than one-off communication between strangers.

One of the implications of this for DFID’s evaluation is to get buy-in from policy-makers and practitioners at an early stage in commissioning evaluations. The Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy found that research or evaluation conducted in coalitions was far more effective for take-up of research than separating processes into different phases, keeping research separate from practice and trying to get others to use findings after they have been produced. The advantages of doing evaluations in coalition or partnership with others are broader ownership and greater confidence in and understanding of results.⁵

Finally research has demonstrated that learning from evaluation to inform policy is only half of the story. As Mosse’s research has shown, policy-making and practice can operate as two discrete sphere so it is necessary to influence both.⁶

Recommendations:

- Improved learning from evaluation will depend on understanding contexts, creating links and coalitions, and communicating credible knowledge
- Involving those who are to be influenced by evaluation findings in the evaluation itself is likely to lead to greater use of recommendations and learning that result from evaluations.

⁴ See <http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/>

⁵ See <http://www.crispindia.org/default.asp>

⁶ Mosse, D. 2005, ‘Cultivating Development’, Pluto press: London.

6. Engaging with relevant representative stakeholders (*consultation question 5*)

We welcome DFID's objective as phrased in the draft policy to commit to consult widely during evaluations including all relevant stakeholders including poor women and men. UK CSOs have a rich experience of consulting diverse groups of stakeholders.

We also note that when DFID mentions 'people' in the draft policy there is no mention of children (p.14). It is common when referring to consultation to assume that 'people' means adults. However, the UNCRC, to which the UK is a signatory, makes it clear that children have the right to be consulted. Since most development programmes (or arguably all since all adults have links with children) have an impact on children – whether intended or not – they have a right to express their views in evaluations. Whilst potentially included within the category of 'marginalised', children (like the elderly) are often missed out during evaluations in practice.

In addition, if evaluations are to improve accountability to those who are intended to benefit from development interventions, it is also imperative that the results of evaluations are fed back to these constituents. Moreover, a good participatory evaluative process can bring together accountability and learning; through involving people meaningfully in the evaluative process, not only are they more likely to learn about what is of interest and benefit to themselves but the process itself can be one in which constituents are offered the opportunity to hold aid practitioners to account.

Recommendations:

- Encourage evaluators to take account of the views of people of all ages – including children and the elderly – when undertaking evaluations.
- Use evaluative processes that involve people in the process of evaluation in a way that they both learn and can hold aid practitioners to account.