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The Role of Aid-Evaluation Feedback as an Input into the Learning Organization

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This article has its origins in two evaluation assignments that I have been involved in during recent years. The first was a review of the feedback procedures of aid agencies in all the member states of the European Union (Cracknell, 1991). This was carried out in conjunction with Dr Hellmut Eggers, then the head of the Evaluation Unit in Directorate General VIII of the European Commission, and his successor Mr Franco Nicora. The second was a study of the role that an evaluation unit can play as an input to organizational learning, which was part of a broader study of organizational learning in development co-operation, commissioned by the Swedish Expert Group on Development Issues and published by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Forss et al., 1998). It seemed to me that the two studies were intimately related since the feedback from evaluation studies must surely be an important foundation block of any learning organization. So the aim of this article is to review the effectiveness of existing feedback procedures in development aid evaluation, with special emphasis on the role of feedback in helping aid organizations to learn. That is the main aim, but I want to set it in the context of the rapidly changing policy environment in which aid programmes in this country and elsewhere are now operating. The latter include new modes of aid delivery, the decentralization of aid administration, the setting of policy targets and monitoring progress, and the trend from the older style of 'blueprint' project planning, towards a more participatory approach.

Effectiveness of Feedback Procedures

Feedback has been a lively topic among aid evaluators for two decades or more, but to my surprise it doesn't seem to figure to the same extent among the concerns of evaluators working in other sectors. For instance, I found only one article, of the hundred or so published in the journal *Evaluation* over the last five

years, that contains the word 'Feedback' in the title – and that was back in 1995. I think one possible explanation for this may be that in other sectors, evaluations are often carried out solely by evaluators from academia, who do not feel themselves responsible for whatever use is eventually made of their reports. Presumably they see their task as finished when they deliver the report. By contrast, the staff of aid agency evaluation units usually play an integral role in the carrying out of evaluations (in close conjunction with outside evaluators) and of course they are very much concerned to ensure that the reports lead eventually to action to improve the quality of aid administration. Certainly when I was Head of the ODA Evaluation Department I regarded feedback, and getting some action to follow the evaluation findings, as the most important part of the job.

Does this mean that the feedback from aid evaluation is therefore much better than that for other sectors? Well, I can't speak for the other sectors but unfortunately I don't have too much confidence that this is true for all aid agencies. The Expert Group on Aid Evaluation of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) carried out a review of the evaluation procedures amongst its members about a decade ago, and at that time the feedback procedures of many of them were found to be pretty rudimentary, and even, in a few cases, non-existent (OECD, 1990). It may well have been as a result of these findings that the European Union study referred to earlier was commissioned. Some of the members of the Council of Ministers (which had originally suggested that the study be carried out) had been enthusiastic supporters of a beefed-up evaluation capability in the European Commission, and among its member states, and they were presumably seeking some assurance that the results were leading to improved quality of aid. If so, our report could not have given them much satisfaction.

We found, just as the OECD review had, that in some of the aid agencies of the member states, there were few if any feedback procedures worthy of the name. Often few people read the evaluation reports, and even if they did, there were seldom any systematic procedures in place whereby the knowledge they gained could be turned into effective action. There seemed to be an unwritten assumption, in some quarters at any rate, that all the evaluation unit needed to do was to produce the reports, send them to the staff most immediately concerned for them to take whatever action they thought necessary, circulate copies 'for information' to more senior staff, and then to leave it at that. It was a kind of early 'trickle-down' theory, which proved to be about as reliable as the other one that assumed that aid injected at the level of the upper echelons of society in the developing countries would somehow percolate down to reach the poor. In fact, of course, there was very little feedback, the power of inertia was too strong for people to change their ways unless they were under some pressure to do so.

Happily the situation wasn't all doom and gloom. Our review did find that some aid agencies had developed systematic feedback procedures that were working very effectively and which constituted models for others to adopt. These included the aid agencies in the UK, Germany and the Netherlands. The common feature distinguishing the feedback systems in all three was that the evaluation unit had a specific responsibility for submitting its evaluation reports

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to a high-level committee of senior management, who in turn had the task of deciding what action should be taken. In the Dutch and German cases, the aid minister made precise commitments to Parliament stating what action he proposed to take based on the findings, and he promised to report back within a given period of time. In the Overseas Development Administration (ODA – now called the Department for International Development – DFID) the Projects and Evaluation Committee, one of the ministry's senior management committees, received the evaluation reports (usually in small batches) on a regular basis, together with the 'cover notes' produced by the Evaluation Department that put forward their own recommendations for action (after having discussed these with relevant colleagues beforehand) based on the evaluation findings. The Projects and Evaluation Committee would either take decisions on its own account, where questions of broad strategy or policy were concerned, or would pass on its comments to the responsible department for action in the case of project-level issues. There was provision for the secretary of the Committee to report back regularly on progress every six months.

The OECD/DAC Report referred to earlier also drew attention to the need for evaluation and feedback to have a high profile within the organization and to the importance of powerful backing from senior management. But at the same time they noted that the evaluators also have a responsibility to produce material in a form that senior management can use: 'The low level of utilisation of evaluation information by senior management may be, at least in part, due to the fact that the information coming from evaluations may not be the sort that can readily be used to guide agency policies and procedures'. Other points made in the review were:

- the need to bear eventual feedback in mind whilst preparing evaluation plans and implementing the evaluations – it shouldn't just be left to the end. They demolished the idea that the evaluation report is the main end-product: 'The evaluation process is no longer perceived by many donors as ending with the tabling of evaluation reports. Canada, for example, claims that the tabling of reports constitutes the half way mark for evaluation completion';
- the need to develop a multi-dimensional approach to feedback, i.e. searching for the most appropriate way of providing the users with the kind of information they are likely to need and can use – making evaluation reports more client-oriented;
- the evaluation report need not be the only kind of outlet for the results: it can be backed up by abstracts, syntheses, training manuals and seminars. For example the European Commission made effective use of its evaluation findings by organizing major seminars (usually in developing countries) designed to draw up 'Basic Principles' sector by sector;
- already individual project evaluations were the exception rather than the rule and most evaluations took the form of syntheses covering quite a number of project evaluations. However, the review thought that this process should be further extended, so that evaluation reports covered

results gathered over quite long periods of time and covering wide geographical areas and incorporating findings emerging from the evaluation work of other aid agencies;

- the review noted that progress in involving the beneficiaries in evaluation work, and in feedback, was painfully slow, and it urged that more strenuous efforts should be made in this direction.

On the whole, despite the deficiencies reported earlier, the OECD/DAC review ended on an up-beat note and clearly they felt that significant progress was being made:

Donors have long passed the stage where feedback is assumed to occur automatically, and have devoted considerable resources during the last few years to developing and applying explicit strategies which encourage and facilitate feedback. (OECD, 1990: 29)

Aid-Evaluation Feedback During the 1990s

The 1990s have seen a great deal of navel-gazing on the part of aid evaluation agencies concerning the effectiveness of their feedback procedures, and gradually further improvements are being made. I was pleasantly surprised, for instance, when I re-visited the European Commission (DGVIII) Evaluation Unit two years ago to discover that one of the most important recommendations we made in our 1991 review, namely that the Commission should establish a senior management committee to receive evaluation reports and to decide what action should be taken on them, had indeed been implemented with the creation of a new Policy Support Group which would have this among its various functions. It just goes to show that sometimes notice is taken of evaluation recommendations!

In 1993 the ODA carried out a study of the effectiveness of its feedback procedures, which involved asking many questions of ODA staff regarding to what extent they had read and used evaluation reports, and how they thought the usefulness of the evaluation reports could be increased (Flint and Austin, 1993). Despite the efforts being made by the Evaluation Department to disseminate its findings, the evaluation found that evaluation reports 'have not had the impact that might have been expected or hoped'. Many recommendations were made for improving performance in this area, including better provisions for ensuring that the lessons were applied and that there was effective follow-up, especially by the Projects and Evaluation Committee as mentioned earlier.

Also in 1993, I published an article on the importance of improving feedback (Cracknell, 1993). I stressed the three essential requirements for good feedback, viz. (a) good evaluation reports that were client-oriented, and satisfied the four 't's – topical, timely, targeted, and taut; (b) there had to be a committee of senior managers responsible for receiving them and deciding what action should be taken; and (c) someone had to follow up to ensure that change came about. I concluded: 'Up to now, in many aid agencies, the resources devoted to preparing evaluation reports have been out of all proportion to the efforts taken to ensure feedback of the findings, or that action is taken on the recommendations. Perhaps this was inevitable in the early days – you have to have a good product to sell

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before you launch an advertising campaign – but now we have long since passed that stage. We have excellent products. Now the need is to ensure that they are effective in improving aid performance’.

Feedback continued to exercise all the aid agencies, and others followed the lead of the ODA in carrying out evaluations of the effectiveness of their feedback procedures. One of these was the Swedish aid agency Sida, which commissioned such a study in 1998, emphasizing the usefulness of evaluation reports to the various stakeholders, and how this could be improved. The results could not have given much comfort to Sida. The authors looked at nine evaluation reports and found that the interests of many stakeholders were being largely disregarded in the design and execution of the evaluations (i.e. they were heavily donor-oriented) so that their usefulness to other stakeholders, notably of course the beneficiaries, was limited. I hasten to add that this would also apply to most other aid agencies, and Sida are to be commended for their willingness to publish these results. The authors noted that Sida staff closest to the projects being evaluated found them most useful, but the further away the staff were from ‘the centre of the project’ the less useful the evaluations were. This was partly because the stakeholders at some distance from the evaluations often never received the reports and so couldn’t react to them, and partly because the further the staff were from the epicentre of the project the less immediately relevant were the findings. They found that ‘there are few examples of evaluations actually contributing something new in terms of knowledge’. Their overall conclusion was that ‘evaluations are useful to a very limited group of stakeholders: for the majority of stakeholders the evaluation process could just as well have been left undone’. This study highlighted what is a common fault of aid evaluations carried out by most donors, i.e. the failure to involve other stakeholders sufficiently in the evaluation process. Evaluations are often seen as essentially the preserve of the donor who needs to evaluate its own projects for its own internal reasons – it still isn’t seen as primarily there to serve the needs of beneficiaries who, in fact, have to carry on trying to make a success of the projects long after the donor has upped and gone. It is truly ironic that some of the most valuable information that evaluations can provide relates to what happens to the projects after the donors have completed their role, i.e. how sustainable they are, yet it is impossible to obtain this kind of information without thoroughly involving the beneficiary stakeholders, which is what the donors at present are largely failing to do.

The Changing Policy Environment

Since the early 1990s, there have been a number of developments in aid administration which have had a profound effect on the effectiveness of feedback. Probably the most important of these has been the process of decentralization, combined with the growing trend away from the ‘blue-print’ style of project planning (where the donor approves a project plan that has to be implemented more or less as originally conceived) towards a much greater use of the Process Approach (whereby more autonomy is given to the local project managers so that the project can be continually revised in the light of experience as it is implemented

and to reflect the wishes of the beneficiaries). The significance of these trends for evaluation feedback will be discussed later.

Another important change has been the trend away from easily recognizable and discrete 'projects' towards support for whole sectors or sub-sectors, with obvious implications for evaluation and feedback. Evaluating at the sectoral level is clearly far more difficult than at the project level, and feedback more problematic.

The sectors now being assisted have also tended to change. They are less likely today to be in such traditional areas as transport, infrastructure, agriculture, hospitals, dams etc. They are far more likely to be in such fields as poverty alleviation, community strengthening, environment, governance, institutional building or rural health. These new sectors lend themselves less readily to evaluation and feedback because the technological component is small whilst the human component is large, and they almost demand a high degree of local participation.

Finally there has been an explosion of interest in the field of knowledge management during this decade, and the emphasis in evaluation work has shifted from the accountability objective (assessing whether the aid was well spent and the objectives achieved), towards the learning objective. Whereas in the past some aid agencies were content that evaluations demonstrated that their aid operations were being efficiently run, now they are looking for evaluations to make a much greater contribution towards the learning organization. It is to this new challenge that I now turn.

Distinction Between Knowledge Management and Learning

The step from knowledge management to learning is not an automatic one. People can acquire knowledge without learning how to translate it into effective action. Learning implies an ability to interpret any fresh knowledge acquired in the context of previous experience and existing knowledge, as well as understanding its significance in relation to current circumstances. Acquiring new knowledge is not too difficult: learning from it is far more challenging.

Interestingly enough, it was the private sector that led the way in the recent explosion of interest in knowledge management as an agent of change. Senior businessmen came to realize that being in possession of key knowledge (e.g. a new technology, or some inside information about a potential new market) gave them a competitive advantage that could be translated into profits. 'Knowledge is power', said Francis Bacon centuries ago, although it would be more accurate to say that knowledge has the potential to be powerful if it leads on to learning. The same realization quickly spread to the public sector and to NGOs. Among the first such agencies to react to this new challenge was the World Bank, whose newly appointed President, Mr Wolfensen, some years ago, started referring to the organization as a 'Learning Bank', and he introduced many innovations to give substance to this conception. I will come back to the World Bank later on.

The decision on the part of the Swedish Expert Group on Development Issues to commission our study referred to earlier was some indication of the importance they attached to organizational learning.

The Expert Group identified three topics to be covered in depth regarding the role played by organizational learning, viz. its role in reshaping people's ideas about girls' education; its influence on the way ideas on technical co-operation had evolved; and its significance as a principal output of an evaluation unit. The choice of the third topic, which was the one I undertook, was highly significant so far as the subject of this article is concerned. The first part of our report covers the more general aspects of organizational learning, such as how an organization learns, how knowledge is shared, stored and used, and how it leads to more holistic approaches to development. The subsequent chapters deal with each of the three selected topics mentioned above in turn. Our recommendations focus on the need for establishing a 'learning culture' in an organization, which in turn implies such things as: appropriate reward systems; learner-friendly internal administrative structures; an improved organizational memory; personnel strategies aimed at enhancing individuals' access to knowledge; the importance of top leadership giving a lead – whilst also being prepared to listen to ideas coming up from below; and such practical aspects as allowing staff time to think and to learn, ensuring flexible rather than rigid work patterns, and fostering informal ways of learning alongside more formal ones.

Learning about Learning

It is rather remarkable that most aid evaluators (save for a small group in Scandinavia) hitherto seem to have taken little notice of the academic work that has been going on in this field. Yet the work of such writers as Argyris and Schon (1978) with their identification of single-loop and double-loop, and also deuterio learning (i.e. learning about learning), is clearly of great importance for evaluation feedback, and there has been a growing volume of literature on the subject in recent years which should be of great interest to evaluators. The probable reason is that evaluators have been so preoccupied getting their evaluation programmes off the ground and resolving problems of procedures and methods, that they haven't yet got round to studying how to transfer knowledge most effectively. To quote a recent working paper issued by the Overseas Development Institute: 'the construction of knowledge is rarely examined' (Baumann, 1999). Moreover there has been an acute absence of evaluations directed at finding out what helps or hinders the transfer of knowledge through evaluation findings. ODA (now called DFID) has been active in this field, as mentioned earlier, but it seems to have been the small group of Scandinavian evaluators I referred to earlier who have focused particularly on these sorts of issues. I have been privileged to co-operate with them on several occasions (Forss et al., 1994; Samset et al., 1994). This is an area where more work is urgently needed.

The World Bank and Knowledge Management

As part of my research for the Sida assignment, I visited the World Bank and the first surprise I had was that there was now a new cadre of staff in post called 'Knowledge Officers' implementing a whole new programme of knowledge

management. This is more than a cosmetic exercise: it bites deeply into the way the World Bank is organized and how it sees its role. To take one example, the Economic Development Institute of the World Bank, which used to act almost independently of its parent body, running training courses for people in the Third World, has now been renamed the World Bank Institute and has been given the task of acting as the 'learning arm' of the Bank. I understand that new World Bank projects cannot now be approved without there having been a substantial input from an Institute staff member, i.e. this is knowledge being geared directly to action.

My visits to World Bank Knowledge Officers opened my eyes as to what a positive knowledge management policy, geared towards what the Bank calls its 'Change Management Programme', can achieve. The Bank sees its 'knowledge assets' as comprising three categories, namely people's experience, Bank documents (research reports, evaluations, etc), and what it calls 'embedded knowledge', i.e. knowledge that has been incorporated into such vehicles as training manuals, legal agreements, computer models and the like (Davies and McDermott, 1996). The Bank's strategy for enhancing its knowledge depends vitally on an acceptance on the part of senior staff that knowledge management is a key element in Bank strategy; on their enthusiastically promoting it; and on their willingness to take practical steps to incorporate it into the Bank's internal structures ('leveraging knowledge', or 'walking the talk'). The practicalities involve such things as: the deliberate creation of a 'learning culture'; the development of information networks; changes in leadership behaviour through aligning the organization's reward systems (e.g. promotion) to proved ability in knowledge management; researching into the most effective techniques of knowledge transfer; and changing administrative structures to emphasize the importance of information flows and knowledge feeding directly into change. Most of these also figured in our Sida report recommendations. They add up to a major shift of emphasis in the Bank, which has attracted commendation from many quarters, and that sincerest form of flattery – imitation.

The Spread of Knowledge Management

Other aid agencies that have also been adopting their own approaches to knowledge management include DFID, which has created a 'Knowledge Unit' (originally an off-shoot of the Economic and Social Research Committee but now operating more as a unit in its own right – it is interesting that the link here is the dissemination of research findings rather than evaluation findings, but both are aspects of feedback). As with the World Bank, knowledge management is taken seriously by DFID department heads. During my Sida assignment, I interviewed one department head who told me that he had allocated a sum of money and an allowance of staff time (two weeks or so) to each professional member of staff to use as they thought fit to enhance learning. They could combine with colleagues, e.g. in inviting a speaker to address them or in running a seminar, or they could spend it individually. This is something quite new in my experience and indicates a willingness to put resources behind the idea. At the same time, DFID staff are

having to cope with new challenges and new opportunities arising from the policy environment changes discussed earlier. These are altering the direction of flow of information networks. They used to be vertically oriented, with information (and directives) flowing from the centre to the periphery, and information and accountability reports flowing back from the periphery to the centre. But now the flows tend to be more horizontally oriented. Staff working in the field have a high degree of autonomy, but they still need to liaise and share experiences with colleagues working in neighbouring countries or regions and faced with similar problems. It is true that they may still need some vertical networking, as they need to keep abreast of policy and strategy issues being formed at the centre, but these vertical flows are far less important, and less frequent, than they used to be. One head of department told me that he had arranged a meeting in London for staff coming from the field, but had deliberately not held it at DFID Headquarters as he felt that might inhibit free discussion. So these vertical information flows are seldom for control or accountability purposes but more for the wider exchange of information and experience. In short, decentralization and increasing local autonomy are changing the direction and the nature of information networking, and, of course, this also affects the feedback process. Moreover the increasing emphasis on participatory methods means that the role of formal evaluation feedback seems to be diminishing, since experience in implementing aid projects in one part of the developing world may not be all that relevant to another part where conditions may be very different. That was always true, of course, but in the past aid agencies tended to pursue centrally directed aid policies that undervalued local differences. Now aid agencies are acting in a way that is far more responsive to local needs and local situations. The knowledge that matters most arises from the day-to-day interaction between project staff and the intended beneficiaries as they implement the projects in a genuinely participatory way, and the extent to which this knowledge can be shared and disseminated more widely is limited because it is so often situation-specific.

However, there still remains a need for some vertical knowledge flows, since otherwise, how are senior policy makers to tell whether the broad strategies they are promoting are being successful or not? This is even more important now that these aid strategies are embracing the new and problematic sectors mentioned earlier – such as good governance, poverty alleviation, community empowerment etc. In so far as evaluations, especially impact evaluations that can provide some evidence of sustainability, are able to provide feedback on these issues they remain of real significance in this rapidly changing world.

Organizational Learning and the Learning Organization

So far I have mainly had in mind the contribution of aid evaluation feedback to the learning organization, and I have had little to say about the more theoretical aspects of organizational learning, i.e. how organizations learn (for the distinction between these two concepts see Easterby-Smith et al., 1999). Increasing attention is now being paid by evaluators to these more abstract concepts. Is the way organizations learn any different from the way individuals learn? Can

organizations in fact be said to 'learn' at all, or can we only think sensibly of individuals as learning? What do we mean by 'learning', and can it be considered independently of the context in which it is gained? Is all knowledge relative to the person acquiring that knowledge and the situation in which he or she acquired it? (to quote the Overseas Development Institute Working Paper referred to earlier: 'The process of knowing is interactive, value-bound and context determined'). These are the kind of issues that the newly appointed 'Knowledge Officers' in aid agencies will have to wrestle with. In terms of evaluation feedback, it is vital for evaluation staff to gain a better understanding of the psychology of people vis-a-vis what influences their willingness to accept, and act upon, evaluation findings. They will need to stimulate more research into how organizations learn. I referred earlier to a piece of research of this sort that I and two Scandinavian colleagues published in 1994 (Forss et al., 1994) which investigated what the staff in the Norwegian aid agency NORAD thought about evaluation reports as a source of learning. We found (as Carlsson et al. did in their 1999 study) that NORAD staff were able to make effective use of evaluation results at the level of the individual project (i.e. closest to their own experience) but they found the broader strategic-level results less useful. Perhaps that is just another way of saying that they couldn't see what they could do about such higher-level findings, as these lay in the province of senior management. Double-loop learning is as difficult to achieve in aid agencies as it is in other sectors. Our main conclusion was that whereas 'learning by involvement' was a highly effective learning experience (i.e. project staff being directly involved in evaluations), 'learning by communication' (i.e. people learning not by direct involvement in evaluations but indirectly through receiving evaluation reports, by attending seminars, etc.) was seldom very effective as a source of learning. Here is a great challenge to all evaluators – how to communicate!

Knowledge as a Source of Power

Increasingly it has been realized, as mentioned earlier, that knowledge can be a source of power. This can be obvious in the commercial sector, where knowledge about some new technology can give the possessor of that knowledge a valuable competitive advantage. In the public sector, knowledge may not be translated into a source of profit, but it can become a means of avoiding losses to the public purse. The development field abounds with examples of how a well-informed adviser has been able to prevent a disastrous waste of public funds on a project that was never likely to be economically successful (but where were they during the ill-fated Groundnuts Scheme in what used to be called Tanganyika?). The public sector has one advantage over the private sector, in that officials are less likely to want to keep information to themselves to enhance their own power status or to steal a march on competitors, but it is not unknown for officials to try to reject or rubbish evaluation findings if they appear to cast doubt on their judgement or efficiency or to undermine policies that the organization is heavily committed to (Chelimsky, 1994). A frequent ploy is to criticize the evaluation methodologies used, as a way of weakening conclusions that may be unpalatable.

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The ODI Working Paper quoted earlier questions the basic Western assumption that actors (government or NGO) will always be willing to pool information to make it accessible to others – it comments that actors in the public sector are also liable to keep information to themselves to preserve their positions of power. The Working Paper discusses the interaction between knowledge, information-generation and power, and comments that what it calls ‘Process Documentation and Monitoring (PDR)’ relies for its success on a willingness to put sometimes sensitive information in the public domain. Yet, increasingly, attempts are being made to ‘privatize’ such information, for financial and other purposes, and this is undermining the effectiveness of Process Documentation and Monitoring.

The Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex devoted a complete issue of its Bulletin, in 1994, to the topic ‘Knowledge is Power?’ (Institute of Development Studies, 1994), and it also concluded that the exploitation of knowledge is never neutral:

The neutrality of knowledge is undermined by the political context within which data are generated and information is analysed, transmitted and used by decision takers. . . . Thus it is less the case that knowledge is power than that the use of knowledge is an expression of power.

For evaluators wanting to foster feedback, these comments underline the need to have a good grasp of the power conflicts within the organization of which it is a part, and indeed within the other stakeholder organizations, since these may well determine the extent to which the evaluation findings are fully taken into account. Another important point made in the IDS Bulletin is that to be able to make full use of fresh knowledge, it is necessary to have some basic skills and resources, and sufficient existing knowledge, because you need knowledge to be able to make full use of further knowledge. Many developing countries find themselves in a disadvantaged position in this respect. As De Kadt commented, in his contribution to the IDS Bulletin, ‘Information is power only to the extent that it is *potentially* enabling’ (his emphasis). Poor people mired in poverty are often not in a position to take advantage of knowledge. Presumably this explains why IDS added a question mark to the title. Moreover, as the Overseas Development Institute Working Paper pointed out, there is a real difference between knowledge systems in the West and those in the East, which presents problems of feedback that evaluators working only in western cultures do not have to worry about.

Information Technology

I haven’t yet mentioned the revolution that has been, and is, taking place in information technology, and I hesitate to introduce it at this stage because it is a vast subject in its own right. Let me just say that aid agencies now have an abundance of data available to them, much of it in electronic form, often including the abstracts of evaluation findings, and in some cases the complete history of each project from *ex-ante* appraisal to *ex-post* evaluation. In fact, there is almost a problem of information overload. The evaluator can only welcome the opportunities that the information revolution presents, to get evaluation findings in

front of those who need to see them, quickly and in a user-friendly form. However, the main danger is that computerized information systems tend to concentrate on factual data, but this may not always, or even usually, be the kind of information that decision takers need. The World Bank, and other aid agencies, are currently reviewing their information systems in an attempt to gear them more closely to the sorts of decisions that have to be taken in the course of aid work. Client-oriented information systems of this kind will have to be developed if only to save everyone from drowning in a sea of unfocused raw data. Preskill and Torres emphasize the important distinction between information that is 'pushed' at us (which soon leads to overload), and information that we 'pull' ourselves (Preskill and Torres, 1999). Turning information (i.e. analysed data) into knowledge (i.e. information-in-use) is a real challenge for evaluation feedback.

Who Learns?

This conference has as its theme 'Evaluation in the New Policy Environment'. So far as development aid is concerned, the new policy environment takes the form of a move away from the old donor-recipient relationship towards a more equal partnership, combined with a new system of aid delivery that puts the beneficiaries in the driving seat (at least to a greater extent than previously), accompanied by the decentralization of structures, linear hierarchies, greater local responsibility, and an aid strategy that is firmly centred on poverty alleviation. Another important new element is the DFID commitment to achieving a precisely stated poverty alleviation target, and this in turn implies that information will have to be collected to monitor progress towards the achievement of this target. At the same time evaluation results will be needed to check whether the overriding objective of policy alleviation is being achieved in an efficient way. All this means that evaluation and feedback will continue to play an important role in the new policy environment, but it has to be flexible enough to adapt to the changing circumstances. However, the donors are not the only people who need to learn. Hitherto, evaluations have primarily addressed the donors' needs, but the beneficiaries also need to learn, as well as other stakeholders such as development consultants, NGOs and teachers of development studies.

Some Conclusions

Evaluation, and evaluation feedback, now have to address the needs of the beneficiaries more directly, including strengthening their capacity to co-operate in evaluations and their ability to absorb and act upon knowledge. The formal evaluation procedures of the past may need to give way to more informal procedures geared more directly to the needs of the staff working in a participatory mode in the field. Impact evaluations, taking place some years after project completion, will still be needed, but relatively greater emphasis will need to be placed on the role of on-going evaluations being carried out in close conjunction with the beneficiaries, the results being fed back, through horizontal networking, to others working in similar circumstances. There are likely to be fewer formal 'set piece'

evaluations and instead an increasing flow of evaluative material emerging from on-going experience. This new kind of evaluation feedback may seem almost indistinguishable from traditional monitoring, except that it will have the added function of analysing information so that it can be turned into knowledge-in-use, and available to a much wider audience. More research into the process of learning itself will be needed, especially into how we learn how to learn! These are exciting days for aid evaluators, and their future influence may well depend upon the extent to which they rise to the challenges before them.

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