

PRAXIS PROGRAMME

Linking Research and Practice in Organisational
Capacity Building

Final Evaluation

- for general circulation-

July 2008

Executive Summary

The Praxis Programme was launched in April 2003 and continued until March 2007. It was a remarkable programme for INTRAC for a number of reasons:

- Through a generous, and flexible grant from the Dutch Foreign Ministry, it brought into INTRAC a significant sum of money (over £1,000,000) relative to its overall budget, which posed serious challenges for the organisation.
- Those who were considered its primary target groups were fulsome in their praise for the Praxis Programme. In spite of all the various problems surrounding the implementation of Praxis, it was an innovative programme which achieved a great deal that possibly only INTRAC could have brought about and this fundamental fact should not be lost amidst the debate that rightly needs to happen about various strategic and operational aspects.

This evaluation was commissioned to pursue two key areas of enquiry which, to a certain extent are informed by these issues. Although it was carried out on behalf of number of target groups, the primary audience is INTRAC. If the organisation is to bid for and implement future Capacity Building programmes, it will benefit from understanding:

- What role the Praxis Programme played in developing stronger CSOs (including INGOs, NGOs, and CBOs, and INTRAC itself)?
- What INTRAC has learned from the Praxis Programme and how can it improve its own practices as a result?

The Praxis concept, at its best, describes a cycle of “distilling meaningful learning from practice”; and then using this meaningful learning to improve future practice. The Praxis Programme, through its various phases attempted to do just that. In view of its networks, reputation and approach to Capacity Building, INTRAC was the ideal - and possibly the only - organisation to be able launch and implement a programme like Praxis. So how well did it do?

The strategic direction that Praxis took was generally sound in terms of the primary target groups, the topics covered and the variety of learning processes that it generated. The approach was described as “unique” and filling an important gap.

Its strengths lay in the fact that it specifically targeted Southern and Eastern practitioners, offering them a menu of topics and learning opportunities which were relevant and accessible to them. Practitioners in their turn could engage with the Programme as they saw fit, and then apply newly acquired insights and learning to their own programmes and organisations. Processes were empowering and, at best, enlightening. The outcomes of the Learning Groups on Organisational Learning, HIV/AIDS in the Workplace and Leadership for example, were widely used and applied.

A significant weakness, which in a sense, was a by-product of its strengths, was that, although the Praxis Programme succeeded in inspiring reflection and learning, the next step - the link to more effective capacity building and strengthened CSOs - was harder to establish.

In fact, many of those who engaged with Praxis commend the learning processes, but are challenged to be able to report how it affected their practice. Others do report changes both at individual levels in terms of developing new tools and ways of working, but find it much harder to point to impact at level of the intended ultimate beneficiaries.

Effectively, Praxis proved to be a valuable and valued programme which inspired reflection and learning, and which contributed to some changes in practice. Whether these changes are sustainable or not is, at this stage, a matter for speculation.

In spite of these limitations, the evaluation finds that a programme such as Praxis broadened the scope of many key actors who are now contributing to on-going debates about CB practice. These debates have the potential to influence and inform practice, and possibly policy, in many areas. As such it makes a contribution which, while hard to quantify, is highly significant. There is much to build on for future programmes. Various recommendations are put forward to that effect.

INTRAC has already learned some lessons from the Praxis experience and there remain a number of lessons and recommendations that should inform the design and management of future programmes. The key recommendation is around ensuring clarity and consensus in terms of goals, objectives, conceptual understanding, and management structures.

If these issues can be addressed, then there is every reason to believe that a successor programme to Praxis will be entirely appropriate to INTRAC's particular niche and can make a substantial contribution to the sector and its effectiveness.

Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks are due to all those who supported the evaluation by answering questions and participating in workshops.

Particular thanks are also due to Anne Garbutt, John Carstensen and Brian Pratt, who conducted interviews of behalf of the Praxis Evaluation; to Adam Houlbrook for providing download statistics; to Rick James for collating valuable feedback from Praxis users; and to John Hailey, Rebecca Wrigley and Mia Sorgenfrei who provided useful background information about the Programme

Thanks are also due to the Dutch Government, the funder of the Praxis Programme and this evaluation, who were prepared to take a risk on such an innovative programme.

Contents

Abbreviations

1. Introduction.....	5
1.1. Evaluation Purpose and Objectives.....	5
1.2. Key Informants Methodology and Key Questions.....	6
2. Praxis Programme: Background and Context	7
2.1. History	7
2.2. Praxis Staff Comings and Goings	9
2.3. Challenges for this Evaluation	9
3. The Findings	10
3.1. Introduction.....	10
3.2. Appropriateness	10
3.2.1. Direction.....	10
3.2.2. Alternative Models	13
3.2.3. Target Groups	14
3.2.4. Areas and Topics Covered	15
3.3. Effectiveness	16
3.3.1. Reaching Target Groups	16
3.3.2. What was Learned	16
3.3.3. Usefulness of Learning Processes	18
3.3.4. Contribution of Networks	21
3.3.5. Quality of Materials Generated	22
3.3.6. Accessibility of Materials	23
3.3.7. Benefits to People Generating Materials	23
3.3.8. Impact of Praxis on INTRAC Capacity Building.....	24
3.4. Impact.....	25
3.4.1. What People Did Differently?.....	25
3.4.2. Have Stronger CSOs developed?	26
3.4.3. Are CSOs better able to Achieve their Missions?.....	27
3.5. Sustainability	27
3.5.1. Lasting Changes as a Result of Praxis.....	27
3.5.2. Changes to INTRAC as an Organisation.....	28
3.5.3. Lasting Value of the Praxis Materials.....	28
3.5.4. Aspects of the Praxis Programme to Build On	28
4. Evaluation Conclusions and Recommendations.....	30
4.1 What did Target Groups Find Most Useful.....	30
4.2 How Effective was the Programme?	
How Effectively Were Resources Utilized?.....	31
4.3 What to Take Forward From Praxis.....	32
4.4 How INTRAC can Improve Design and Management of Programmes.....	34

Abbreviations

ALN	Action Learning Network
BOND	British Overseas NGOs for Development
CB	Capacity Building
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CDRA	Community Development Resource Association
CDRN	Community Development Resource Network
CORAT	The Christian Organisations Research and Advisory Trust of Africa
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSSO	Civil Society Support Organisation
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
HIV/AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus/ Auto Immune Deficiency Syndrome
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
ISTR	International Society for Third Sector Research
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NNGO	Northern Non Governmental Organisation
OCB	Organisational Capacity Building
PRIA	International Center for Learning and Promotion of Participation and Democratic Governance
PSO	Knowledge Center for Capacity Building
SMT	Senior Management Team
SNV	Netherlands Development Organisation
VBNK	Training Institute of Management

1 Introduction

In April 2003 INTRAC launched the Praxis Programme with funding from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The aim of the programme was to enable civil society organisations to more effectively fulfil their mission through increased 1) generation, 2) access to, and 3) exchange of, innovative and contextually appropriate practice and research in organisational capacity building. The programme officially finished in June 2007, although the Programme Manager left in March 2007 and was not replaced and some Praxis products were still being completed after June 2007.

The original plan for the evaluation of the Praxis Programme involved carrying out an impact assessment five years after its completion. However, when the Programme did close, it was agreed that there was a need for a different sort of evaluation, which should be carried out as soon as possible. The reasons given were that, while it would have been interesting to assess longer term changes brought about by Praxis, an impact assessment would not capture important recommendations either for learning or for the design and management of future capacity building programmes within INTRAC, both of which were seen to be priorities within the organisation.

1.1 Evaluation Purpose and Objectives

The focus of this evaluation is on the outcomes of the Praxis Programme and, where possible, emerging impact.

It covers two key areas of enquiry:

1. What role has the Praxis Programme played in developing stronger CSOs (including INGOs, NGOs, and CBOs, and INTRAC itself)?
2. To what extent has INTRAC been able to learn about and improve its own practices as a result of the Praxis Programme?

These are addressed through the following four objectives:

- To assess what target groups found most useful from the Praxis programme in terms of a) topics and b) ways of working/disseminating knowledge.
- To ascertain to what extent the programme was effective and that resources were well utilised.
- To help INTRAC, in conjunction with other interested stakeholders, decide what to take forwards and strengthen from the Praxis programme.
- To learn more generally about how better to design and manage INTRAC programmes in the future.

The evaluation has been carried out for the following stakeholders:

- The primary stakeholder is INTRAC itself. The results of this evaluation should enable INTRAC's Senior Management Team (SMT) and staff to reflect upon and apply the lessons learned from the Praxis Programme in the design and development of future capacity building (CB) programmes.
- Other stakeholders include CSSOs, Catalyst Group Members, users of Praxis materials, Learning Group members and the donor, the Dutch Government.

The evaluation team was made up of an INTRAC Associate who was not very involved in Praxis, the new INTRAC Programme Director and a freelance consultant.

1.2 Key Informants, Methodology and Key Questions

Key Informants: The evaluation sought the views of selected sample of relevant stakeholders from INTRAC staff, Associates and Trustees, all members of the Praxis Catalyst Group, representatives of each of the Learning Groups, Praxis writers and consumers, and a select group of reviewers of the Praxis materials. CSSOs were represented through the Catalyst Group, the Learning Groups and through the writers of Praxis publications. Respondents, especially those from the Catalyst and the Learning Groups, were selected on the basis of their active involvement in their respective groups.

Methodology: The evaluation builds on information that had already been collected analysed and presented through reports and reviews and other media through the life of the programme (see especially the narrative report for a detailed description of programme achievements).

As the evaluation's focus was on outcomes and emerging impacts (which translate broadly into exploring the extent of learning that resulted from the programme, and investigating how performance is beginning to change at different levels), data collected and analysed has primarily been qualitative, although a statistical analysis of downloads from the web site formed one component.

Methods used included:

- Secondary research of Praxis plans, reports, meeting notes, correspondence and other relevant documents;
- Semi-structured interviews, both face to face and via phone;
- Short questionnaires ;
- A three way in depths review of a selection of Praxis Notes and Papers;
- A statistical analysis of downloads via the internet to identify which publications were the most popular and, to a limited extent, to test whether interest in the publications has been sustained over time.

For the most part, data gathered has been triangulated by using similar question areas for different target groups, and through secondary research and the review of publications.

Regardless of the success or otherwise of Praxis externally, it is apparent that this programme raised some questions within INTRAC during its life time. For this reason, the evaluation has invested significant time and resources in including and involving INTRAC staff and Associates in the whole process. Ownership both of the process and the results of this evaluation are considered to be key to its success.

Key Questions: The objectives of the evaluation were addressed under the following headings: appropriateness, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. During the course of the interviews, it became apparent that a number of issues belonged under a further heading of efficiency (as it related to the management of the programme). This extra heading is therefore included in the findings.

2 Praxis Programme: Background and Context

2.1 History

It is important to provide a brief history of the evolution of Praxis, as this provides insights into the ways it evolved from its original design and its subsequent development. Information for this section has been collated from reports and discussions with staff.

The Original Design: In April 2003, INTRAC launched the Praxis Programme with funding from the Dutch Foreign Ministry. Praxis was awarded a budget of £1,042,000 over a period of 4 years. The original proposal was developed hastily in response to a valuable opportunity to bid for and secure a substantial amount of funds for a capacity building intervention. The proposal was based on a number of already existing INTRAC relationships and interventions with CSSOs. It also sought to incorporate elements of other funding proposals that had been submitted unsuccessfully.

A “Strategic Manager” and two staff members were recruited. In September/October 2003, Praxis clarified its objectives and work plans to the Board¹. The original Praxis goal was to “*contribute to the formation of strong civil society organisations that effectively fulfils their mission to contribute to poverty reduction*”. It proposed five programme activities (research, internal capacity building for INTRAC, seminars and networks, dissemination of good practice and research fellowship and exchange). It set up the Catalyst Group to support Praxis by “*sharing advice and ideas, helping track future trends encouraging new learning, facilitating networks and contacts, being both motivational and where appropriate offering a critical perspective, providing some oversight on programme strategy and offer conceptual clarity*”²

The period between October 2003 and April 2004 was quite unsettled. The Strategic Manager left and was replaced in April 2004 by a Programme Manager who continued in this role till March 2007.

The Evolution of Praxis: In July 2004, both the objectives for the programme were revised and the target groups were more clearly identified. This appears to have represented an effort to develop a proposal, which had been hurriedly put together from a number of existing INTRAC activities, into one which had a clearer purpose and greater coherence. The goal of Praxis was now to “*enable civil society organisations to more effectively fulfil their missions through increased generation of, access to, and exchange of innovative and contextually appropriate practice and research in organisational capacity building*”. This goal was to be achieved through four key objectives:

- capturing innovative practice;
- recognising and responding to culture and context;
- catalysing exchange and dissemination;
- improving evaluation and impact.

¹ Praxis Update: October 2003

² Praxis Update October 2003

Four key themes and two cross cutting issues emerged from a number of themes that were considered: HIV/AIDS in the Workplace, Organisational Learning, Leadership and Development and the Monitoring and Evaluation of Capacity Building. The cross cutting issues were values and power of capacity building, There is recognition that the focus was sharpened around this time.

In December 2004, a **Monitoring and Evaluation Framework** was developed. Among other things, this framework revised the primary and secondary target groups identified in the original design. Now the **primary target group** for the programme was “*Southern and eastern civil society support organisations*” and the secondary target group included “*international support organisations (including INTRAC itself); international NGOs, international research institutions; donors*”.

The “Evolved” Praxis Programme:

The Praxis programme included the following components:

1 The production of a number of publications and resources for practitioners to learn and share knowledge and resources:

- 2 Praxis Guides by November 2007 (with 1 still being completed)
- 18 Praxis Papers (and 3 still being completed)
- 35 Praxis Notes (and 3 still being completed).

Most Praxis papers were translated into Spanish, French, Russian and Chinese and, in some cases Arabic and Farsi.

ii. **The dissemination of these resources** through the distribution of hard copies; INTRAC’s website; the monthly bulletin E-trac.

iii. **Learning processes:** The formation and development of ‘learning groups’ was a very significant part of the programme’s learning process. The ones that were most successful were the groups on:

- HIV/AIDS and capacity building;
- Organisational learning;
- Leadership development;
- Monitoring and evaluation of organisational capacity building.

iv. **Networks and Relationships**

The programme also sought to expand networks to stimulate mutual learning on these issues. This included strengthening linkages with and between:

1. European NGOs;
2. International networks;
3. Support providers in developing and transitional countries;
4. Think tanks.

v. **International Conference on Civil Society and Capacity Building**

In December 2006, towards the end of the programme, a broad range of stakeholders (130 participants from 40 countries) was brought together to discuss issues around civil society and capacity building at an international conference in Oxford. A paper was produced which reviewed the learning that had emerged from Praxis over the previous four years. There was also a competition of capacity building success stories, the three

best of which were presented.

Strategic Direction: This was to be provided by the Catalyst Group, an impressive group of influential CB practitioners and academics who were to meet once a year. Although their roles had been defined (see above), there remained some confusion both within the group itself and from those outside it, as to what their role really involved.

2.2 Praxis Staff Comings and Goings

Through its four year history, Praxis saw a significant turn over of staff. Added to this, job titles and roles of existing staff changed. This in turn led to some lack of clarity within INTRAC about roles and responsibilities of members within the Praxis team.

From existing documentation, it appears that during the course of the four years, there were three or four programme directors/managers; at least three programme coordinators (at some times there were two coordinators in post simultaneously); support from at least four different members of INTRAC's research team at different times; two people working part time on editing, marketing, production support and web site support. Additionally there was support at different times from INTRAC staff on conferences and events, learning groups and finance.

Continuity within the Programme was provided by at least three members of staff, each of whom stayed with it for three years; and one who worked for 18 months. However, it appears that at least five people only worked on the programme for a period of 6-9 months.

2.3 Challenges for this Evaluation

This evaluation faced three key challenges:

- Firstly, we had to decide which Praxis to evaluate. Should we assess it on its original design, or on what it subsequently became? Bearing in mind that the first year was largely spent on refining directions and on addressing personnel issues and that the programme effectively began operations in mid 2004, we decided to focus the evaluation on this evolved version of Praxis.
- We struggled with the challenge of attributing impact to Praxis; and to being able to cite with any certainty the likely sustainability of outcomes of the Programme. On reflection, given the nature of the programme and the time frame within which this evaluation is set, it may have been unrealistic to expect that we would find such evidence. However, the evaluation team feels that it was important that we asked these questions if only to set realistic boundaries for future programmes of this nature.
- In spite of our best efforts to interview as many CSSOs as possible, we finally had direct contact with 14 Southern CSSOs. Although this means that the results relate directly to a very small percentage of the CSSOs who were in some way involved

with Praxis, we believe that the answers would reflect, to a greater or lesser extent the views of other participating CSSOs.

3 The Findings

3.1 Introduction

This section provides a summary and synthesis of the information collected through the various methods described in **Section 2**.

The Findings are presented as answers to each of the key questions posed by the evaluation. They include both a short summary of the findings and a clear indication of different perspectives from each of the groups of respondents who were interviewed. Conclusions and recommendations are found in **Section 4**.

Although this section is a little lengthy, it is important to note how divergent some views about the Praxis programme really are. It will be noted that INTRAC staff and Associates were, on the whole, less confident that Praxis either took strategically wise directions, or effectively addressing the needs of the identified target groups; whilst, on the whole, the people for whom the programme was developed, were very positive about many aspects of Praxis.

3.2 Appropriateness

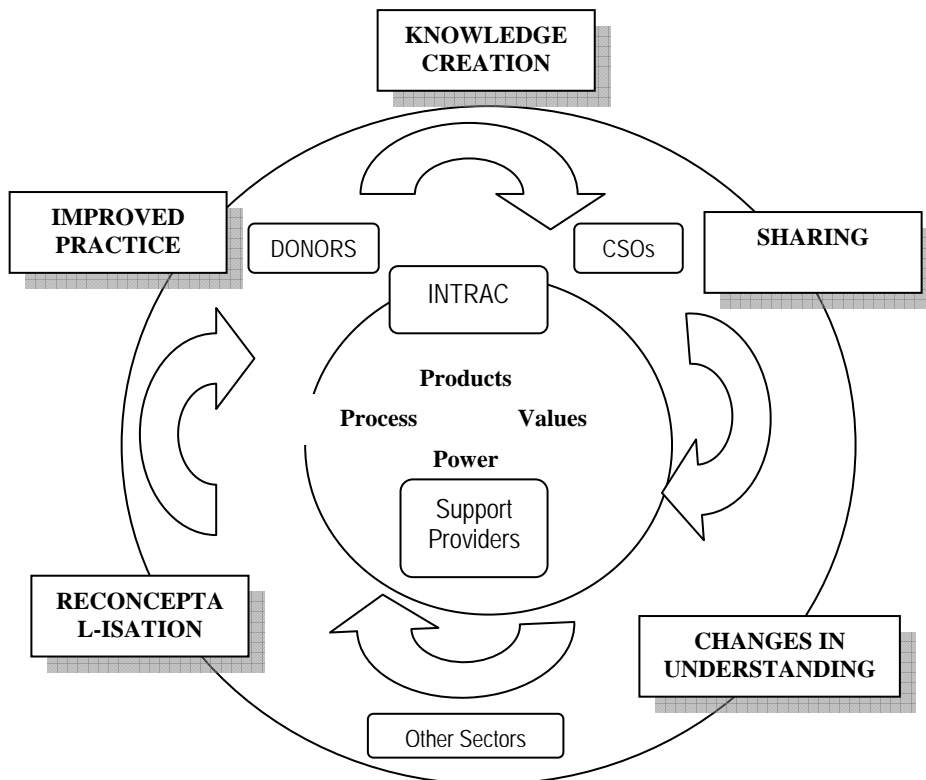
3.2.1 Did the programme take the appropriate direction in terms of enabling civil society organisations (particularly Southern and Eastern CSOs) to more effectively fulfil their missions through increased 1) generation 2) access to, and 3) exchange of, innovative and contextually appropriate practice and research in organisational capacity building?

The relationship between theory, learning and practice and how to encourage connectivity between the three is at the heart of this question. Two questions are relevant:

- Along the spectrum of theory to practice, where should Praxis be placed?
- How are the links between theory, learning and practice visualised, and therefore how best to support and develop them?

Clearly, views about this have differed and continue to do so between individuals within Praxis (during its life time) and within INTRAC, especially between those in the Research Department and those who are working as practitioners. Different organisations also approach these links from different perspectives.

The Praxis team worked to the following visualisation:



It is noted however that this model does not accurately reflect the complexity of the relationships between the components described. Components are seen to be connected by clearly defined arrows, which all head in the same direction. This implies that making links between components is also clear and straightforward, when in fact experience suggests that a more realistic visualisation might be sparks flying off a Catherine Wheel! At the very least, the connectors are sporadic, dotted, and heading in multiple directions.

In general, all comments from the South, and many from the North suggest that, as its name suggests³, the design of the Praxis programme did encourage these links to a greater or lesser extent, especially from 2004 when it adjusted its focus. What is perhaps less clear is the extent to which the new knowledge and learning acquired by those engaged with Praxis translated into organisational capacity building. This is discussed under “Impact” and “Sustainability” (**Sections 3.4 and 3.5** respectively)

What the programme did not do to any great extent was to generate many ‘blue sky’ innovative materials. Much of what was produced could be described more in terms of “mining” existing information and packaging it in new ways. However, it could be argued that innovation is in the eye of the learner: for many individuals, the learning about and sharing experiences around topics and issues that were new to them, may well translate

³ Three possible definitions:

- Praxis is a complex activity by which individuals create culture and society, and become critically conscious human beings. Praxis comprises a cycle of action-reflection-action which is central to liberatory education.
- A Greek term, literally meaning "action", adopted by Karl Marx to emphasize the importance of action in relation to thinking.
- Practice: translating an idea into action; "a hard theory to put into practice".

into innovative practices in their work places. Also, some Praxis materials examined how theoretical work on capacity building worked out when implemented in different contexts, which was of considerable value to practitioners.

Reflecting on the original goal and design of the programme and the directions that it subsequently took, it would appear that the latter design was actually better suited to the primary target groups, as it was more process driven and it effectively moved the heart of the programme out of what could be considered by some Southern practitioners as the Ivory Tower of the North.

Positive Aspects of Programme Direction

“A synergy between practitioners and researchers around the world relating to the practice of capacity building. I think this helped them to understand their own practice more, relate it to a conceptual framework and share their experiences with others”. Ex staff member.

“... a range of useful practitioner orientated resources in key areas of capacity building practice through engaging both practitioners and researchers in supported learning processes. Documenting learning in a useful way”. Ex staff member

Members of the **Catalyst Group** felt that one of the strengths of Praxis was its proximity to the practice end of the spectrum. Some felt that it could have been still more focused on the practical, or could have been improved by being more practical. Others commended the combination of learning groups, meetings and products.

For **INTRAC staff and Associates**, key strengths of Praxis included:

- The way in which Praxis was able to make links between conceptual thought, learning and improved practice;
- The encouragement of synergies between research and reflection;
- The ability to derive the essential learning points from complex theory and practice respectively and make these easily accessible;
- The encouragement of Southern partners and CB providers to be better able to reflect and write about a variety of theories and practices related to CB;
- The publications: for their volume and innovation; the fact that many of them were translated; and that they were all freely downloadable.

For the **Learning Groups**, the real key for success was the practical orientation of the programme. Many felt that Praxis helped to bridge the gap between practitioners and academics in bringing them together and trying to combine the best features of each (reflective and analytical skills with hands-on experiences). Many acknowledged that Praxis gave them the much needed space to think, reflect and to step back from the ‘to do mode’ (as described by one the OL group members).

“One of the learning group members mentioned that the best aspect of Praxis was linking research with practice. She used to think that researchers and practitioners live in two separate worlds that do not often link. The programme helped her as a practitioner to understand better the value of reflection and research. This view was also expressed by the authors”. From Synthesis of Learning Group Interviews.

Other strengths of the programme include the development of networks, the stimulation of learning and exchanges between Southern and Eastern CSSOs, the publications, the development of the web site as a tool for communication and learning, and - to a certain extent – the workshops

Negative Aspects of Programme Direction

Different **INTRAC staff** members made the following comments:

- The original design did not defined clearly enough how researchers and practitioners would engage in the programme;
- Research did not really happen as had been originally intended;
- The programme fostered learning through the gathering and sharing of existing knowledge and practice, rather than through the development and sharing of new or innovative ideas;
- Additionally, with the notable exception of the research on HIV in the workplace, Praxis Papers, Notes and Guides did not generate new knowledge or ideas on any global scale;
- Although the conceptual framework and process design enabled the programme to focus on crucial CB issues, it was acknowledged that there were difficulties in controlling the extent to which the dissemination on knowledge and learning actually led to their application in practice and whether the programme did lead to sustained change;
- There was no external/advocacy type component which would have focused on alternative approaches to CB in the context of Civil Society; and engagement with policy makers;
- Gender issues were under-represented.

Secondary research: The challenges and weaknesses which regularly featured in annual reports to the Dutch Government included:

- Innovation: It was seen as a challenge to develop more effective ways to identify, and encourage the sharing of, innovative practices further into the learning processes.
- Quality: questions around what this meant (see below, Section 3.3.5)
- Human Resource Capacity: to provide the support required by this sort of programme.
- Strategic Flexibility: the struggle between maintaining the tight strategic focus but allowing for flexibility to adapt to emerging needs and trends.
- Engaging Practitioners from the East and the South both in Learning Groups and in the process of supporting their writing.

3.2.2 What were the alternative models and how would they have compared – such as a more pure research approach, or hands-on capacity building? What else was happening out there along these lines – was this covering new ground or duplicating what others were doing?

There are other models for fostering organisational capacity building which have different strengths, but it seems that the Praxis model was distinct and “unique” in the strenuous efforts that it made to forge working links between theory, learning and practice. It would

be fair to say that, the publications may not have been heralded as innovative, but the revised Praxis design was. It is also clear that INTRAC was particularly well placed to implement this sort of programme; and that there continues to be a need for CB programmes that prioritise improved practice through learning.

Catalyst Group Members and INTRAC Staff and Associates suggest that, in terms of Capacity Building, although other organisations were working in similar areas, Praxis was unique in working to make explicit links between theory, learning and practice. Key areas of difference between other organisations⁴ that work in similar ways to the Praxis, and Praxis itself include:

- '(NGO) works with CSSO partners, but that it focuses more writing than practice'.
- '(NGO) stresses networking, but does not appear to deliver in terms of practical exchanges of learning and publications'.
- '(NGO) work on capacity building issues, but are constrained by institutional processes and inflexibility of funding'.
- '(NGO) is less reflective than Praxis'
- 'Praxis is more practical than (NGO)'.

Although there appears to be an abundance of material on capacity building, at the level of theory and policy, there is much less which focuses on practical experience.

Significantly, they note that INTRAC is a very appropriate organisation - and, due to its reputation and contacts, maybe the only organisation – that could make this sort of programme happen.

Learning Group members saw the programme as “a refreshing initiative”.

“This was the most inspiring initiative I’ve ever been a part of.” Learning Group Member

3.2.3 Were the appropriate target groups identified?

The primary target group for Praxis was “*Southern and Eastern civil society support organisations*”. There is a strong basis for believing that this was the appropriate target group, although there was potential for reaching more people within this group. As one respondent points out, people involved in the workshops were “the usual suspects” and, as a result, their thinking was not sufficiently challenged.

The secondary target groups included, “*international support organisations (including INTRAC itself); international NGOs, international research institutions; donors*. The evidence suggests that, on an individual basis, many members of these target groups found elements of Praxis to be very useful, but it’s possible that the attempt to include such a broad spectrum of stakeholders was a little ambitious. What is clear is that the main focus for all the target groups was that Praxis should be on the practical application of learning.

Were there other groups that it could also have targeted? In the interest of extending the capacity building potential of future programmes, INTRAC might consider building in a

⁴ ECPDM, Coordination Sud, CDRA, SNV, PACT, Impact Alliance, SNV/UNDP and Trace were cited

more explicit focus on INGOs, who are working to build the capacity of their own partners as this is a major element of capacity building today. Additionally, INTRAC should continually strive to identify and include influential CB practitioners in future these programmes.

Other suggestions for extending the list of target groups, made by different members of the **Learning Groups** and the **Catalyst Group** include:

- Praxis should have developed more horizontal linkages – to organisations similar to INTRAC.
- Workshops should have had a better mix of participants from all the different continents and not too many from Europe.
- More middle sized NGOs should be involved as well as more frontline staff from the field.

3.2.4 Were the areas/topics covered the key issues according to the target group(s)?

Praxis topics were apparently selected by a process of:

- Internal discussions;
- Discussion with catalyst group members and other key stakeholders;
- A review of a range of past INTRAC consultancies.

The Learning Groups developed from those topics where there was already a body of interest or an existing engagement in the topic. It was reasonable to expect that practitioners found these topics interesting and relevant.

Some **INTRAC staff members and Associates** reported that this process was “very rigorous – almost too much so!”

Members of the **Catalyst Group** generally considered that the topics selected were of interest and relevance.

Key factors that respondents cited in their appreciation of **Praxis publications** were their practical relevance to work on the ground, and the fact that they offered some new aspects to thinking (even if not completely new ideas). They were less appreciated when they were seen to be too conceptual and hard to grasp for practitioners; if they offered no new thinking or if they were not considered relevant to practitioners.

Members of all groups proposed some topics they would like to see covered in the future (see Recommendations, **Section 4**)

A key point to emerge from this question, and one that was made by many respondents, was the necessity of having “champions” for each topic. The presence of a champion was considered key to the successful development of the process of exploring and learning about that topic. Some **INTRAC staff** felt that there were “too many topics and not enough strong leaders”.

The choice of topics therefore appears to have been appropriate because they were relevant; that a number of people were keen to engage with this thinking and because there was a dedicated facilitator who was able to guide the process. Realistically, there

will always be more topics that practitioners would like to explore, and indeed, a number of proposals have been put forward. Selection of appropriate topics for future programmes should bear in mind all the elements which underpin these choices.

3.3 Effectiveness (Accessibility, Quality, Innovation)

3.3.1 Were the identified target groups reached?

The answers to this question from all sources suggest that, via its different processes, the programme had a good outreach. It identified and involved many key players in each participating country, who are highly influential within their own contexts. However, it must be remembered that the primary target groups are CSSOs, not only key individuals within them. To what extent the organisations themselves were reached by Praxis is harder to assess; and it depends on what individuals took back to their organisations. In terms of Organisational Learning, Leadership and HIV/AIDS in the workplace, it is clear that CSSOs were reached. For other topics the reach was less direct and therefore less traceable.

In terms of the secondary target groups, findings indicate that some individual INTRAC staff, members of INGOs and research agencies were involved with Praxis to some extent. There is some indication that, via the Catalyst Group, a number of key players in the world of organisational capacity building were reached. Again, the effect of having reached many key and influential people is hard to trace, but feedback from interviews suggest that many of them promoted (and continue to promote) Praxis products and processes very widely.

3.3.2 What was learned by whom as a result of the Praxis programme?

There is no doubt that the Praxis Programme inspired learning with the majority of those individuals who were involved in any or all of its processes. Some respondents claim that they use elements of Praxis almost on a daily basis.

Individual answers are too many and varied to document here, but they include:

- Learning new concepts (i.e. reflective practice);
- Understanding new aspects of topics or areas of work that they were already involved in (i.e. the political side of CB, the importance of individual in organisational review);
- Learning about themselves and being personally challenged (i.e. what does it mean to be an African leader? What is my identity and impact?).

They relate to specific publications, to participation at workshops, being part of a learning group, or writing a Praxis Notes or Papers.

The majority of **INTRAC staff and Associates** interviewed recorded that they engaged with and (consequently) learned from Praxis to a greater or lesser extent. Some felt “fully engaged”, whilst, at the other end of the scale, a few described their engagement as “very partial”.

Those involved in writing Praxis Notes were very positive in their feedback about how effective this learning process was for them. They commended the way in which Praxis staff had supported their efforts to transform experience and reflections into written documents, both for the learning it engendered, and for the empowering quality that accompanied the process.

Unsolicited feedback to Praxis writers and to Praxis programme staff, demonstrates the fact that large numbers of **people who read Praxis publications** were so impressed with the Praxis Papers or Notes they had read, that they felt inspired to contact the author and the programme to communicate their enthusiasm and, in some cases, to report how they had used and promoted the document(s) in question.

Based on information gathered through interviews, secondary research and reviews, the topics that generated most learning, through various media, were around Organisational Learning, HIV/AIDS in the Workplace and Leadership.

Of the feedback received, many of those interviewed were not able to cite specifically how learning had influenced their thinking and behaviour (but some pointed to greater conceptual clarity, or improved understanding).

"This one (Praxis Note 1) was excellent and should be required reading for all expats, like me, working with national staff on development projects. The Paper both broadened my understanding of a challenging issue and provided important and helpful practical advice. It helped me see through a different paradigm!" Praxis Note 1: Cross Cultural Management and NGO Capacity Building

Others were able to explain clearly how they had used their learning to effect change. This included both changed or improved practices on an individual basis, and changed practices within organisations.

"This was very helpful for both my coaching with our lead national staff person for the P & CB project work, and in turn, for him to use in his coaching of NGO executive directors. It helped both of us to broaden our understanding of what leadership means, and to give it more attention". Praxis Note 27 Executive Coaching for Leadership Development

However, the issue of linking learning both in the direction of theory and in the direction of improved practice remains a challenge that, INTRAC staff at the workshop believe, Praxis was not able to fully address.

It was much more difficult to facilitate this process than it was originally expected. It required much more time and resources than was possible (e.g. to make a practitioner in Africa reflect on their work and end up with a publication that presents the reflection and connects it with theory required much more work and resources than was expected).

3.3.3 How useful were the Praxis learning processes? How did they compare and which were most effective for which target audiences?

“Depended on the theme. Where there was a champion and a clear niche for INTRAC in the field, the learning groups worked quite well (HIV and OL). The papers were of mixed quality partly because practitioners do not necessarily write well and INTRAC itself does not naturally write in a highly engaging and accessible manner. Overall I think each of the Praxis processes worked well at some times and not so well at others.” Staff member

One of the strengths of Praxis was its variety. The programme accommodated both those who engaged deeply and those who wanted a “quick fix” by reading the latest Praxis paper.

The different learning methods all promoted learning and change in their own ways. The workshops and D-groups concentrated on interactive learning from each others experiences. The writing process emphasised personal change in specific individuals and promoted change through self-awareness. The publications promoted increased understanding within the wider CB/development community. What unites all these methods is the concerted effort to create reflective spaces for learning and their success in doing just that.

There are no clear answers as to which methods were more effective for different target groups. Respondents generally felt positive about the processes that they were involved in. This suggests that they were able to make choices based on their needs and interests. The ability to be able to choose from a menu of methods reflects well on the design of the programme. Future programmes should build on this.

However, on the whole, it would appear that the Learning Groups, which were championed by a passionate “leader”, and which combined workshops, exchanges, and the potential for writing up experiences, were most effective in harnessing energy and creativity to push forward new understanding and improved practices.

The large capacity building conference in December 2006 was valued by INTRAC staff, but it would appear workshops generated by Learning Groups were more effective in stimulating learning and exchange; and possibly represented better value for money than the conference. Praxis also contributed to some other international conferences organised by INTRAC during 2003-06 but those conferences were not part of this evaluation.

Learning Groups: Learning Group members themselves report that being part of such a group was useful in many ways. It provided them with an opportunity for networking and linking with other practitioners. Sustainable relationships were built. Also, it gave space for practitioners to think, reflect and discuss. As a result the members felt inspired and challenged. Also, their understanding of the topic(s) was deepened.

The Learning Groups on Organisational Learning and HIV and Capacity Building worked best in that they had a significant amount of input at the beginning in order to engage active interest and build momentum. They engaged a diverse range of stakeholders and

produced a range of resources – both conceptual and practical – that were widely accessed. Critically, each had a “champion” who was passionate about the topic and as able to drive and inspire the process. Actively engaging the catalyst group in these processes was also considered very significant.

Example of Learning Group Activities:

HIV/AIDS & Capacity Building Learning Group 2003/07 Highlights

- Over 100 practitioners have joined the **Learning Group** as a recognised forum linking practitioners and other stakeholders. These include members from local NGOs, International NGOs, researchers and practitioners.
- **7 Praxis Notes** and **3 Praxis Papers** produced, which are among the most regularly downloaded Praxis publications and are used as training materials.
- **Joint research** was carried out into the organisational costs of HIV/AIDS in Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda in collaboration with CABUNGO, CDRA and Trace. This research has been published in 2 Praxis Papers and received additional funding from Cordaid.
- An **International Conference on HIV/AIDS and Capacity Building** was organised in Johannesburg with 35 participants to explore ‘*Moving from Policy to Practice: Building Civil Society Organisational Resilience to HIV/AIDS*’. This stimulated great discussion and the identification of specific ways to apply learning within participating organisations. Additional funding for the conference was received from ICCO and PSO.
- HIV/AIDS is now much higher on the agenda of a number of CB providers in Africa, including CABUNGO, TRACE, CORAT and CDRN.
- A **close collaboration** has been developed with ICCO, Cordaid, Stop Aids Now! And further funding has now been obtained to extend the work of the learning group for another three years.
- A **Praxis Guide** documenting the insights and experiences gained to date around this topic will be produced in the following year.

This Learning Group has subsequently accessed further funding to continue as an independent INTRAC Programme, called “Strengthening Support for HIV/AIDS in the Workplace”.

The learning groups were not so successful when there was no active ‘champion’ for the group or no critical mass of interested people.

Workshops: These provided opportunities to disseminate the members’ own research with a wide network of practitioners. Generally the workshops received positive feedback on how they were organised. INTRAC was seen as a good facilitator and everyone were encouraged to talk and share their experiences. Some criticism was raised in relation to the mix of participants as well as lack of focus in some workshops (trying to cover too much in too little time).

For INTRAC some workshops resulted in the distillation of thinking (e.g. the “quality paper” that resulted from the Johannesburg conference).

The Conference: There was a wide range of views on the December 2006 Conference in Oxford. This may have been due to the fact that, although it was designated as part of the Praxis Programme, it connected closely to other current INTRAC work and initiatives. Some respondents found it to be a useful way to share ideas and cutting edge thinking, while others were more critical. Within INTRAC itself there are also divergent views about what the organisation should have done at the conference. Some felt that INTRAC should have come to the conference with a position on CB while others felt that the lack of an explicit position was a positive advantage.

In spite of the fact that there were outputs from the conference (notably the 3rd Praxis Guide, although it is questionable how much it actually drew on Conference discussions and a draft “Oxford Declaration” of CB principles), the evaluation concludes that the conference was not the most focussed, valued or successful of the Praxis processes.

Catalyst Group Meetings: In spite of the issues around strategic direction, all those involved in these meetings felt that, in different ways, they had gained from the process.

Web based Products and Processes: Major achievements were highlighted in relation to the website and new e-bulletin, *e-trac*. These included a substantial growth in numbers of people registering on the website and downloading documents, and from a more diverse geographical spread. The website is seen as an excellent communication tool which is easy to access and navigate, and an important area to be further strengthened.

In spite of the fact that some INTRAC staff were sceptical about the way in which Praxis made use of the web for communication, and dissemination, it appears that it was a successful medium at least for those who had access to this sort of technology. It also forced INTRAC to embrace newer web-based technology.

“E-trac is one of the best tools that were developed through Praxis!” Workshop group.

Downloads of Praxis Publications: This is seen as strength of the programme. The ability to download free Praxis Products is described as generous spirited, which hopefully inspires others to do the same. A number of respondents stated that the publications were the best thing about Praxis; and that Praxis will primarily be remembered for its publications

Download statistics evidence high levels of interest. They also show that the publications continue to be downloaded - some of them more now (since May 2007) than when they were first published. This is significant considering that since April 2007 INTRAC has had limited resources for advertising and promoting Praxis materials. Comments from people interviewed during the evaluation suggest that recently the promotion has largely been done by practitioners recommending the publications for their colleagues and clients. Other people will be finding Praxis materials by just using search engines for relevant materials and/or visiting INTRAC’s website without any other contact with the programme.

Most Popular Downloads	Total downloads	Since May 2007
Note 6: Using African Proverbs in Organisational Capacity Building	1,766	410
Paper 3: Organisational Learning in NGOs	1,525	889
Note 18: Capacity Building at Grass Roots: OD of CBOs in South Africa	1,149	600
Paper 10: NGO Leadership Development	1,372	604
Paper 2: Assessing the Impacts of Organisational Capacity Building	1,111	699

Respondents report that they use these downloaded publications for training and teaching, consultancies, resource materials, awareness raising. Comments received show that Praxis materials are disseminated more widely than INTRAC could have expected.

“ I have for almost 10 years been teaching at Danida Fellowship Centre, for people from Asia, Latin America and Africa, where INTRAC Praxis has “got a lot of positive propaganda”. It is most welcome that you are translating into Spanish, Russian etc. I am sure that many has subscribed to your mailing list after these courses”. Respondent to E-Trac questionnaire

D-groups: For those using D Groups, opinions were highly divided. Some did not find them useful at all, whilst others thought they were one of the most important parts of Praxis, if not the most important. The groups were active straight after the workshops and were useful in sharing experiences and discussing the Praxis paper that would come out of the workshop. However, due to the lack of committed facilitators, the groups did not last long enough to support continuous exchange of ideas or networking. Also, some members who wished to join the group were not able to do so because they did not have the necessary technology.

3.3.4 To what extent did the development of networks of capacity building practitioners to contribute to their development of knowledge and their improved performance?

INTRAC provided the perfect platform for networking but it was up to the individuals to make the most of these opportunities. Members of **Learning Groups** generally found that the networks and relationships that developed as a result of Praxis have been very fruitful. The networks have contributed to practitioners’ development of knowledge by providing continuous opportunities for learning and sharing. Some workshop members still exchange experiences and papers with each other and provide comments on each others work. Also, Praxis provided opportunities for organisations to find partners that share similar interests with them. For example, the HIV/AIDS learning group connected five African CB organisations with each other (Trace, CDRN, ACORD, CABUNGO and CADECO). This collaboration has continued after Praxis and has been an important step in developing African wide networking of capacity building CSOs. The workshops, particularly in Johannesburg and Phnom Penh, were cited as valuable networking opportunities.

However, as one of the participants noted, the creation and sustainability of these networks is based on the efforts and energy of the individuals involved. Experience suggests that a dedicated champion enhances the chances of it having a useful life and function. Having a clear focus for a network (e.g. feeding into a new Praxis Note/Paper) was also a useful way to keep up the momentum. Some networks clearly lasted longer and were more productive than others.

Others interviewed were not so clear about the value of the networks which were formed as part of Praxis. Some respondents noted that INTRAC's lack of active engagement in these networks was disappointing.

It would have been valuable to be able to map the networks in countries, across countries and across continents that developed as a result of Praxis.

3.3.5 What was the 'quality' of the materials generated? How did Praxis products measure up against these interpretations of quality?

"It was expressed that there is a need to seek a better balance between writing quality publications with critical, in-depth analysis, on the one hand, and ensuring simplicity, relevance, accessibility for practitioners, and efficient delivery, on the other." Extract from 2004-5 report to DFM

Quality: The issue of "quality" was first raised as an issue with Praxis in 2004. It was never fully resolved within INTRAC during the life time of the Praxis Programme. Essentially, the tensions lay in the fact that the Praxis publications were perceived by some as lacking in "academic rigour". Others suggest that the issue was not so much about quality but about 'procedure and ground rules' for producing materials.

Interestingly, in spite of the misgivings of some within INTRAC about the quality of the publications, and the debates that sometimes took place over their production, they are seen to be a resounding success by those at whom they are targeted. This is largely due to the fact that, from 2004, the Praxis team used "relevance and accessibility" as their criteria for quality for their identified primary target groups, CSSOs, even if these criteria were not formally accepted by the organisation. As such, the publications measure up very well. They are highly appreciated and valued for, among other things, their brevity; their quality; their practicability; the fact that they are rooted in practice and share real experiences; and that they use simple language. As one of the Learning Group members expressed: *"Publications are the strength of Praxis! They are relevant and fill a gap in the market". "They are better than any other publications as they are from practitioners for practitioners"*. **Unsolicited feedback**, as well as **download statistics**, also provide strong evidence to show that publications were highly valued and widely used.

It is worth pointing out that publications which were deemed to be "too academic" or "too theoretical" were less popular with the primary target group. Some of the earlier publications were seen in this light. Respondents from both the **Catalyst Group and the Learning Groups** encourage further simplification of publications for the benefit staff working on the front line.

There remains an issue that, for a small minority of the secondary target groups, a few respondents noted that they would have liked to see more academic rigour in the publications. The solution to this issue probably lies in ensuring greater clarity around the primary purpose and target groups for these publications.

The **three way review group** was asked to comment on selected number of Praxis publications representing the most and least successful papers and notes from the key thematic areas.

Overall, the group scored papers more highly when they were readable and accessible; practical and relevant; well structured and pursued a clear and logical argument. Of these, the key factor often seemed to be their practical relevance to work on the ground, plus giving some new aspects to thinking (even if not completely new ideas). For the publications that they were less positive about, they found them to be too conceptual and hard to grasp for practitioners; or lacking in new ideas; or not very relevant to practitioners on the ground.

Review Group Favourite Publications (of the ones reviewed)
Paper 3: Organisational Learning in NGOs
Note 12: Robbed of Dorothy
Paper 13: The Organisational Impacts of HIV/AIDS on CSOs in Africa
Paper 14: Coaching and Mentoring for Leadership Development in Civil Society
Note 16: Communities of Practice: Lessons Learnt from Latin America.
Note 27: Learning Leadership Development from African Cultures

The evaluation did not solicit reactions to the Praxis Guides (mainly as only one has been in circulation for a period of time).

3.3.6 How easily digested and translated into local contexts were materials/processes?

Generally, Praxis Notes and Papers are considered to be relevant and easy to apply in practice. The fact that so many publications have been so widely translated and used in other languages bears testimony to the fact that they adapt well to other cultures and contexts. This is verified by comments from the **Praxis users** who also indicate that the Praxis materials are used in a variety of different cultural contexts. One respondent, for example, cites the fact that the African proverbs were very successful in the Central Asian context. **Secondary research** indicates that all the Praxis Notes about cross cultural issues have been popular.

3.3.7 What benefits did Praxis bring to the people generating materials?

For the **Learning Groups**, the opportunity to write and reflect was widely appreciated. In general, they found the **Praxis Notes** very useful as they were seen to be valuable products resulting from both workshop processes and learning group interchanges. They wanted to see more local practitioners being encouraged to write.

For many **Praxis authors**, the writing process was the best and the most important part of Praxis. Many of them were not experienced writers/researchers and they considered that the process of writing Praxis Notes was probably the most effective method for effecting learning and change within individuals. They found the process of reflection and writing that developed their skills in thinking analytically and documentation to be very empowering. They stated that it increased their conceptual understanding of different thematic areas and provided new inspiration. It contributed to the increased self-esteem of the authors and involved shifts in power and identity (especially among the African practitioners).

The unexpected outcome of the writing process was the flow of positive feedback the authors received. In some instances this resulted in new relationships being built and new work opportunities arising.

In particular, Praxis authors appreciated:

- The opportunity to step back and reflect;
- The coaching and mentoring received from INTRAC;
- The process of self-discovery that accompanied the writing;
- The opportunity to increase their knowledge of the specific areas studied;
- The opportunity to develop new models and tools that have been useful in consultancies and training.

Many writers commended the support given to them by Praxis and INTRAC staff in writing Praxis Notes.

However, for some within INTRAC, the process of writing some Notes was fraught with difficulty and seen by some as overly time and resource consuming:

“Researchers had to edit poor quality materials (damage limitation): very time consuming. In one case, by the time the occasional paper had been written, edited and re-written, it cost between 40-50 days work” INTRAC staff member

In summary, the process of supporting writers was quite resource expensive and it benefited a small number of individual people, but it was significant in that it encouraged a view that non-experts and southern practitioners have valuable knowledge and insights which can be widely shared. It is worth noting that the process was as important as the outcome for this component of the programme.

Future programmes should consider how best to foster this process. In their workshop, INTRAC staff proposed devoting more time and resources to supporting writers, ghost writing, and further capacity in this area.

3.3.8 What impact did Praxis have on INTRAC’s own specialists working on capacity building?

The impact on INTRAC’s specialists working in CB is very varied. Some few individuals have gained enormously; for others, Praxis has had little impact. There are any reasons for this, which were explored in the evaluation workshop, but briefly they included feelings that the Praxis “style” (seen as focusing on writing and individual reflection) was

not a preferred style; that workloads were too heavy; that there was no mandate to engage; that there was nothing stimulating or new about Praxis

Members of the **Catalyst Group** note that INTRAC staff should have been more involved in Praxis.

Overall Praxis could have had a much greater impact in this area; and it is to be hoped that future programmes will be able to engage and include INTRAC staff more comprehensively.

3.4 Impact (Empowerment)

3.4.1 What did people [CSSOs, INTRAC, donors, Southern CSOs] do differently as a result of their learning from the Praxis programme?

According to information gathered, some practitioners state that they **changed practice as a result of Praxis**. Others felt that their practices had improved. Many struggle to say whether changes that have occurred are results of Praxis or whether they would have happened anyway. A few did not see any changes in practice at all.

Some of the changes that were mentioned included **changes in the way the practitioners carry out specific pieces of work**. The most frequently cited changes referred to organisational learning. Respondents cited (among other things):

- Building stronger and more holistic strategies for OL which include ensuring space for reflection and building OL into appraisal systems.
- Including new insights generated by Praxis into training and consultancies; and the way the designed and implemented evaluations.
- Setting up funds to build the capacity of their members.
- Developing lobbying and advocacy through reading Praxis material.
- Incorporating programme changes in projects.
- Embarking on process of operationalising HIV/AIDS workplace policy, including efforts to document and share experiences of this.
- Extending networks and building exchanges of experience and ideas on different topics.
- Improved effectiveness in organisational structure.
- Improved ability to discuss leadership issues openly.
- Improved ability to market the organisation better.
- Developing new partnerships.
- Improved self confidence on own ability to write and contribute to development debates.

As a result of Praxis, **INTRAC staff** note that the organisation:

- Learned how to use IT systems for communication and learning.
- Developed a better understanding of OL, and as a result, has developed OL systems for INTRAC and is better able to advise other INGOs on the topic.
- Sharpened its thinking around CB.

Other changes included the development of new tools and ideas for training and consultancies, such as (MSC) ; the ability to better advocate for CB, ability to research, learn and document as well as improvements in personal characteristics. (i.e. leadership abilities).

Many of the changes cited are indeed reflected in the planned indicators for this programme. Praxis can be proud of the effect that it has had on the self confidence of African writers; and the way in which they now feel better equipped to contribute to development debates.

One area where changes have not been noted is that of contributing to broader conceptual or methodological debates on policy as it relates to capacity building.

The difficulties of **attributing changes in practice to their learning as a result of the Praxis** programme were acknowledged by the majority of those interviewed. There is not a clear black line leading from learning to changed practice, as there are so many other possible factors to consider. At best it seems that Praxis can take credit for either triggering change or contributing to change within organisations as a result of learning by one or some of the individuals within those organisations

3.4.2 Ultimately have stronger CSOs resulted in terms of greater programme impact and organisational development?

As stated above, practices have changed and improved as a result of engagement with Praxis.

Evidence points to some examples of strengthened organisations resulting (in part) from engagement with Praxis. However, we have to ask whether the evolved Praxis Programme focussed too much on triggering learning and change in the willing individuals at the expense of teams and organisations (the original design focussed more specifically on working with INTRAC traditional partners). How effectively did these individuals pass on their learning to CSOs? Did they actually become catalysts of change within them? And what steps did Praxis really take to encourage learning to be taken on to the next stage? What could Praxis have done to make this link more effective?

“One of the learning group members mentioned that being part of the group was fabulous and she was inspired by the workshop but it did not result in changed practice as after the workshop she was too busy to try to implement any change”. From Synthesis of Responses from Learning Group

Added to this reflection, we note too that, with the exception of very few cases, it is unrealistic to attribute greater programme impact to one programme of this nature. In some situations, Praxis can claim that it has *contributed* to some changes within organisations, for example, in relationship to leadership, OL and HIV in the Workplace. In other situations, the link between individual learning and improved practice and “stronger organisations” is much more tenuous. The “ripple effect” that INTRAC espouses when it describes the way in which CB affects and impacts on OD, suggests that that the links may be made, but we are not dealing with a still (or even stagnant)

pool into which a “pebble of wisdom” is dropped, but one in which there are many other waves. This is never the case. INTRAC and other CB providers would do well to consider the metaphorical state of the water before and during the dropping of pebbles. With a deeper understanding of this, INTRAC may be able to contribute more effectively to the development of stronger organisations.

3.4.3 Are CSOs better able to achieve their missions as a result?

As above, the answer to this question lay beyond the scope of this evaluation. It is very hard to identify any evidence for this, but again intuitively, one would feel that if capacity building provision is of relevance at all, then learning that improves performance of capacity builders is likely to lead to stronger CSSOs.

3.5 Sustainability

3.5.1 What lasting changes have/are likely to come about as a result of Praxis programme?

The scope and timing of this evaluation and the somewhat intangible nature of a programme of this nature makes it difficult to do any more than speculate on the answer to this question.

What can be said at this point is that, as Praxis did not address all the multiple barriers to change that organisations and individuals within organisations face when they are looking to improve or change practices (and perhaps it could never have been realistically expected to do so), the sustainability of the outcomes are effectively outside programme’s sphere of influence.

That having been said, there are indications that some parts of the Praxis Programme may be sustained. They include:

New insights and changes in perception about, for example, leadership, or the effect of HIV in the workplace, the value of organisational learning, how to monitor and evaluate CB, especially when they have affected or influenced managers, leaders and policy makers, may lead to sustained changes within organisations.

New tools and the practical application of new ways of working, such as analytical and adaptive capacities, Most Significant Change, coaching and mentoring leaders, using proverbs ways in which capacity building can be monitored and evaluated.

Through strengthening **effective partnerships** between local, national and international organisations, both Praxis, and therefore INTRAC, have benefited from the diverse experiences, skills and contributions that each partner offers and therefore achieved a greater impact through coordinated action. Depending on the critical mass of the group and the presence of an active facilitator, these partnerships which developed as a result of Learning Groups, D-groups, and conferences may or may not last; and may or may not be productive.

Publications continue to be downloaded and will continue to have an affect on those who read them.

3.5.2 What changes did it bring about to INTRAC itself as an organisation?

Externally, some **Catalyst group members** and most of the **Learning group members** interviewed stated that Praxis has enhanced INTRAC's reputation. They reported that Praxis reinforced the image of INTRAC as a knowledge centre. INTRAC is seen as a strong organisation which supports practitioners in CB and foster the development of networks.

Praxis has had a role to play in encouraging INTRAC to become more process oriented and more focussed on using the internet as a valuable tool for learning, networking and communication. Management systems have also been adjusted. However, there is potential for more change and adaptation in terms of building staff capacity especially in the areas that Praxis was working on.

3.5.3 Do the materials produced have lasting value and benefit and should they continue to be promoted and disseminated? If so, how?

The download statistics indicate that, to date, the publications are of lasting value; and that they should be promoted and disseminated. Almost all of the papers are continuously downloaded (and some have been downloaded more now than when they were first published). Comments received from Praxis users show that INTRAC is not the only one disseminating the Praxis materials. They are frequently disseminated through other web sites, publications and institutions. Trainers and consultants report that they promote and disseminate publications in the course of their work. Materials are also being translated by others in order to make them more suitable to the contexts where they are working. Some will be of lasting benefit and relevance and some will not.

It is recommended that INTRAC develop a system to track the popularity of publications. It will be valuable to set up a strategy to continually promote the publications as widely as possible.

3.5.4 What aspects of the programme should be built on and developed (what should not)?

Most of those asked, especially the interviewees from the **Learning Groups**, and the **Catalyst Group**, felt that Praxis should continue in some form or another. Reasons included:

- Praxis has an important role to play in distilling meaningful learning from practice;
- CB is under threat and it needs active support;
- It has been a very valuable programme;
- There are very few other organisations that could support and develop a programme such as Praxis.

Many useful suggestions about how to build on the success of Praxis have been put forward. They are summarised below. It will be important for managers of future programmes to ensure the active involvement of primary stakeholders in the process of verifying, refining and prioritising these proposals:

- **Networks:** These should be further encouraged and strengthened. It may be possible to develop national network in different countries. There was also a call for stronger horizontal linkages to similar organisations to INTRAC based in the North such as PACT.
- **Target Groups:** In addition to the primary target groups identified in Praxis, future programmes should consider involving more medium sized NGOs in order for good practice to be shared more widely. It will be valuable to broaden the target group base to ensure that thinking and ideas are challenged by different stakeholders.
- **Tools:** There is a need for more simplified tools for front-line staff. This may or may not be something that future programmes wish to consider. However, brief and simple, are key guiding thoughts in the development of any new tools for practitioners.
- **Methods:** Although the effectiveness of **D groups** was disputed, it seems clear that they have an important, if short term role to play in following up from conferences. They should have clearly defined purposes and time lines and should have a dedicated facilitator for the process. Some workshop members suggested that Praxis should **encourage joint writing** among practitioners. This was proposed in the Cambodia meeting but then the initiative died. Some consideration should be given to developing more collaborative approaches to writing which combine knowledge and experience with clear communication and writing skills.
- **Publications** should be targeted at practitioners. This means that that learning should be linked to practical examples on the ground; they should not be too theoretical or academic; and the style and language of the publication needs to be easily accessible to second language speakers of English. A more strategic programme of translating material into relevant languages is also proposed
- **Workshops** were much appreciated by those attending. They propose more (frequent) workshops in different parts of the world.
- **Management:** In terms of structure, there was a call for more involvement of organisations in the South in the management of the programme.
- **New Topics to explore:** For the future the following topics were proposed:
 - Empowerment,
 - Sustainability,
 - Advocacy,
 - Knowledge management,
 - Partnership ,
 - MSC,
 - Systems Approaches,
 - CB for M&E,
 - Civil Society
 - Coping Strategies,
 - Self Management and Emergence.

In terms of implementing future CB programmes, proposals put forward by **INTRAC staff and Associates** include:

- There should be organisational clarity around the purpose of a CB intervention; and the difference that it may make. This should be accompanied by a clear plan to track changes, throughout the life of a programme; and an ability to adjust the direction accordingly.
- More rigorous needs analysis from potential target groups should inform the design of any new programme. There may be ways of involving representation from these groups in the steering of the programme.
- INTRAC should ensure that it fits a niche that fits the organisation's style and mandate. Among other things, this involves having a passion for both the processes and the outcome of the proposed programme.

4 Evaluation Conclusions and Recommendations

This section concludes the evaluation by referring back to its four primary objectives.

4.1 What did target groups find most useful from the Praxis programme in terms of topics and ways of working/disseminating knowledge.

The topics which are seen to be most popular are, for the most part, inextricably linked to processes that were successful. Bearing in mind the design of the programme and its strong focus on process, this is to be expected (and, in fact, determines the overall success of the Praxis approach).

Members of Learning Groups were self-selecting so, by definition, the chosen topics were relevant and interesting to them. Where there was a strong and focussed Learning Group, the members were able to engage with issues around this topic in a wide variety of ways. They were able to choose how many or few of these processes they would engage with; and how deeply they wanted to explore the topic. Some members wrote publications, while others attended a workshop, followed a D-Group; or become a member of a new local or regional network.

The strength of the successful Learning Groups lay in the variety of learning options and the open-ended nature of the groups which afforded participants the opportunity select the issues that were most relevant to them; and to apply their learning as they saw fit. A more structured process, one which was more specific about expected outcomes, may have been less useful to many of the members. The analogy which describes the difference between throwing a stone - where weight and velocity can be calculated and therefore we can predict with some certainty where it will land - and releasing a bird to fly where it wants, comes to mind. Although it is much harder to justify funding for this sort of programme, there is enough evidence to show that it does result in learning, reflection and improved practices, at least on an individual basis.

Based on these thoughts, the most successful Learning Groups were those on Organisational Learning, HIV as it relates to the workplace; and leadership.

The publications have proved to be a highly valued product of Praxis; and possibly what Praxis will be remembered for. They appear to have filled an important gap in CB literature as they were, for the most part, accessible, practical and relevant. They serve to support a host of capacity building activities (training, awareness raising, the development of resource materials etc). Information gathered through the evaluation suggests that the publications have been disseminated far more widely than was ever anticipated. The fact that they are freely downloadable demonstrates a strong and commendable commitment to the sharing of learning.

Publications which have been particularly praised and widely used include those on African Proverbs, MSC, Adaptive and Analytical Capacities and Investigating the Mystery of CB.

4.2 To what extent was the programme effective? How effectively were resources utilised?

In terms of encouraging reflection and learning, Praxis was very effective in that, among other things, it:

- Disseminated a wealth of relevant and useful material in user friendly and accessible ways.
- Generated important new learning and insights for many of those who were engaged in its processes.
- Empowered a small but significant group of Southern and Eastern CB practitioners to be able to reflect on and learn from their own experience; and then to document all of this in Praxis Notes. The benefits both to them, and to those who have read and applied their learning, is widely recognised.
- Added substantially to the list of publications that are freely available and which are of direct relevance to Southern capacity building providers. These publications are also widely used and promoted by trainers, consultants, NNGOs and others to inform their thinking and practices.
- Generated numerous networks at all levels - local, national, regional and international – which worked together to develop understanding and practice around key thematic areas. Some networks continue to operate.

What it did not do was to generate much new, innovative or in-depth research, as had been planned (in the original proposal) However, for primary target group, this does not seem to have been a problem.

In terms of the transference of learning to improved practice and stronger CSSOs, Praxis can claim some clear successes, but they are less easy to track and there is always the problem of attribution. More realistically, Praxis can take credit for triggering or contributing to changes in practices both in individuals and organisations. The evaluation is unable to state with any certainty whether these changes will be sustainable.

With respect to the usage of resources, it is very hard to assess how effectively they were used given the difficulty of attributing the ultimate impact of this sort of programme. There were clearly issues related to the management of the programme, initial delays and much debate which will have consumed much time and energy. Nevertheless, in

spite of these problems, it must be acknowledged that the output of the programme in terms of learning groups, workshops, conferences and products was impressive. Given the positive feedback from the intended beneficiaries, many of whom are highly influential actors within their own contexts, it can be concluded that resources were overall put to effective use.

4.3 What should INTRAC, in conjunction with other interested stakeholders, decide what to take forwards and strengthen from the Praxis programme?

Praxis was considered unique in its effort to make working links between theory, learning and improved practice. INTRAC is also considered to be the right, and possibly the only organisation, to house a programme such as Praxis. It is recommended that INTRAC further develops this type of programme, as this will serve both to confirm a recognised niche for INTRAC in this field; and to promote and market a USP (unique selling point) for the organisation.

Programme Content:

- In terms of identifying future CB topics to explore, INTRAC should involve primary target groups identifying potential themes. It should then select only those topics/themes in which it intends to invest meaningful contributions, time and resources. This will include identifying a staff member who is passionate about that specific area and will be prepared to lead on it.
- While issues should partly arise from the priorities identified by partners within the sector, the possibility should be left open of identifying a topic which is not seen as a priority, but is identified as of potential future importance and where the programme can play a role in leading a new discussion (as happened with HIV in the Workplace in this programme).
- Future programmes should consider how they might include an advocacy component which would ensure that the programme engages more actively with policy makers.
- Efforts should be made to ensure that gender issues are given greater priority.

Target groups:

- In identifying and selecting target groups, INTRAC should continually strive to identify and link with influential CB practitioners and partners in the areas where it has chosen to focus; and to invest in building strong and lasting relationships with them
- Future programmes should continue to be outward facing in terms of target groups. The primary focus should be on capacity building providers, again emphasising those from the South.
- There could also be more room for improved collaboration with NNGOs who are working to build capacity with their partners. While INTRAC rightly stresses the importance of Southern providers, the fact is that NNGOs do play a major role in this area and good practice needs to be encouraged there too. This could include some kind of strategic partnerships being developed for different thematic areas.

- INTRAC should not be seen as a 'target group' in itself, but future programmes should develop strategies for enabling INTRAC staff and Associates to engage more comprehensively and systematically in the learning processes that built into these programmes. This may involve a consideration of different learning styles how best to support them; an explicit prioritisation of learning within very full work loads. It will certainly require support and under-writing by Senior Management
- Research Institutions should not be cited as a target group, but they may have useful roles to play. For example, materials produced by future programmes for practitioners might be used by research institutions (or indeed the research department within INTRAC) to develop more academic or theoretical papers which would contribute to higher level engagement about policy; and defending the role of capacity building on the development agenda. Educational institutions could also open up new networks by encouraging their students to reflect on their practical experiences.
- Consideration should be given to the role that future programmes might play in influencing donor attitudes towards capacity building.

Learning Processes:

- **Learning Groups** were very successful when the right ingredients were present. Build on this model and ensure that all necessary resources are available. Continue to provide a wide variety of learning opportunities for target groups, and ensure that effective monitoring processes enable the adaptation and development of each.
- **Web-based products and processes:** It is recommended that systems for tracking trends and patterns in downloads, as well who are using them and for what purposes, is developed and maintained. Equally, web pages need to be continually updated and communications with other actors maintained.
- In view of the fact that **D Groups** were often seen as a valuable method for following up discussions after workshops but that they seemed to have had a short shelf life and tended to dwindle or die for lack of active support, it is recommended that future D Groups have a clear goal and purpose for the groups; and a defined and agreed time-line for its existence; and are supported for the time allocated by an active facilitator.
- **Networks and Linkages:** In order to be able to track the development, evolution and life span of networks generated by future programmes, it would be useful to map already established relationships at the beginning of a new programme and then to set up a mechanism for tracking the growth and development of new networks. Equally, it might be fruitful to build on the Praxis networks by mapping key actors working on similar topics; and to indentify ways in which collaboration might be possible.
- The process of **supporting writers** was time consuming but it was clearly very valued by those who were empowered by the process and the materials have been widely read. Future programme should build on this strategy and possibly find other ways of supporting non-experts to share their wisdom and experience in capacity building. This could include such strategies as ghost writing, or co-writing with experienced writers in this field, but may also include other media which do not rely so heavily on the written word.
- **Conferences:** The 2006 conference was considered by many to have been a very useful vehicle for sharing and developing ideas whilst, for others, the agenda was not clear. Another view was that INTRAC should have taken more of a lead to ensure clearer outcomes. If future conferences are included as

- Programme components, the agenda and the outcomes need to relate specifically to programme objectives; and the conference needs clear and focused facilitation to this end.
- **Quality:** The issue of “quality from whose perspective?” was never fully resolved. As the objectives were ultimately defined, if the primary target group were capacity building providers, then quality should be seen as what is accessible, relevant and useful to them. Much of what was produced did in fact meet these criteria, but the evaluation showed that some within INTRAC nevertheless felt that this was inadequate. This evaluation recommends that INTRAC needs to decide upon the need for and nature of quality standards for products aimed at different audiences.

Quality of Publications:

- The following recommendations are proposed to improve the quality of publications:
 - o Build in a process for more practitioner reflections and critiques on publications and activities over the coming year, to ensure that the practitioner perspective remains central to Praxis.
 - o Develop a system which can track who is downloading the material and for what purposes. Based on this, informed decisions could be made about which materials to continue to disseminate and which have a limited shelf life and should therefore be withdrawn after that period.
 - o Prioritise translating the papers for the relevant languages (for example, a paper dealing with Latin American civil society should be translated into Spanish.) This did not always happen in Praxis.
- For individual papers:
 - o Titles should state clearly say what the publication is about, but should also be a bit attention grabbing if possible.
 - o Papers should be written with both the needs and language levels of the target groups in mind. Guidance should be given to writers as to exactly what this involves.
 - o All publications should have a good summary of the learning points from the narration for a capacity building implementer to use for either making choices or following to develop a capacity building programme.
 - o Conclusions should be very user friendly especially given the poor reading culture amongst those the papers and notes are intended for so that those who do not want or do not have the time could use the summaries and conclusions to pick out what they need.
 - o A ‘what would you do if....’ list of issues for a practitioner to be helped to be analytical about the paper or notes contents could be developed at the end especially for the notes. This could help the reader to debate solutions to the issues raised.

4.4 How can INTRAC improve the design and management of future CB programmes?

For future programmes, the following recommendations are made:

In terms of design:

- Ensure that programme goals and objectives are clear and accepted by all in terms of the target groups and the scope of anticipated outcomes and changes. If goals are expressed in higher level terminology (e.g. enable CSSOs to achieve their missions), ensure that the programme objectives explicitly include collaboration and complementarity with other CB providers with the intention of distilling meaningful learning from practice.
- In the Praxis Programme, this link between individual learning and organisational change was weak. It would be useful to consider more carefully how individual learning translates into more effective teams and stronger programmes; and where INTRAC can most effectively strengthen those links.
- Locate (or buy in) areas of passion within the organisation and ensure that there are “champions” in this areas who will be able to provide leadership and commitment to the development of this area.
- Clearly define key programme concepts, such as quality, innovation as they relate to the agreed objectives, and then set up systems for measuring success around these specific definitions. It should be noted that innovation does not necessarily have to be a goal in itself, although it should be encouraged and nurtured if the potential is there. There was, and continues to be a value in “mining” and sharing the wealth of information and skills that already exists in this field
- INTRAC may need to continue to explore the broader question what difference capacity building actually makes (and if it makes a difference) and build the results of these explorations into future programme design.

In terms of strategic direction and management:

- The concept of the Catalyst Group is excellent. Its primary role should be on helping set strategic direction (not management) and mobilising support. Future programmes should consider how to maximise the experience and expertise that such an influential group has to offer, while ensuring that management remains clear and coherent.
- Ensure that management and advisory roles are clearly defined, understood and agreed by all involved at the outset of the programme. There needs to be a single clear line of management, with inputs and support from others, but not multiple controllers. Research should provide supportive input, but not play a ‘quality control’ role if it means dual lines of management.
- Explore ways combining clear strategic direction with flexibility for adaptation and responding to emerging trends and needs.
- While it is recommended that the management of future programmes lies with INTRAC, there is potential for a greater influence on strategic direction being provided by INTRAC’s southern and northern partners. Efforts should be made to encourage this area of influence (and not to get caught up in INTRAC’s internal differences of opinion).
- Depending on the availability of funding, INTRAC may have to consider applying for different pockets of funds for different themes. This may affect the development of a holistic approach to a capacity building programme, but efforts should be made to encourage coherence across these different programmes.

- In view of the increased potential for developing learning and communications strategies via the web, INTRAC might consider investing more time and resources in developing the organisation's skill base in this area.