INTRAC’s 6th Evaluation Conference Report

From 3-5 April 2006, 120 international delegates gathered in the Netherlands to attend INTRAC’s 6th Evaluation Conference. The delegates represented a broad cross-section of organisations and individuals involved in international development, including Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) from a range of regions, international NGOs and their partners or affiliates, locally-based NGOs, missions, universities, official donor agencies and foundations.

Conference Objective

This conference aimed to generate dialogue between practitioners, academics and policy makers. Going beyond the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of projects and programmes, the event examined the wider monitoring and evaluation trends in issues such as advocacy, capacity building, networking, civil society development, humanitarian disasters, and conflict prevention.

INTRAC’s Role

The 6th Evaluation Conference was a culmination of the preceding four Regional Workshops arranged by INTRAC and held in Peru, Ghana, Sweden and India during 2005. It was therefore appropriate that the Conference had a worldwide scope and brought together separate, but complementary, debates on the trends within the field of M&E, placing an emphasis on having a flexible conference programme within which to facilitate discussions between a broad cross-section of people.

Conference Proceedings

On Monday the 3rd April, Brian Pratt, INTRAC’s Executive Director, began the conference proceedings with an overview of the five previous Evaluation Conferences. He outlined the rationale for this conference – pulling together the threads from the preceding regional conferences. ‘Issues we are Grappling With’ was the theme of the keynote presentation by Sadiqa Salahuddin (Indus Resource Centre, Pakistan). She brought out different ways in which appearances are becoming more important than substance when it comes to civil society work: the lack of resources for proper background research; ineffectual projects that are kept going so that donors don’t lose face and the implementers keep their funding; funders who are interested only in correct procedures rather than having an impact; and the security agenda influencing development work on the ground. The opening plenary presentations can be accessed at http://www.intrac.org/pages/open.html

The opening session was followed by a ‘Market Place’ where participants had the chance to set up stalls promoting their organisation, and to circulate and discuss each others’ work. The process is described in http://www.intrac.org/pages/market.html

On Monday we also heard feedback presentations from the regional workshops in South Asia (India, November 2005, see http://www.intrac.org/pages/PRIAWorkshop.html) and in Latin America (Peru, August 2005, see http://www.intrac.org/pages/Latinworkshop.html). The presentations and background papers for all four Regional Workshops can be found on http://www.intrac.org/pages/reg.html

Monday also saw the first round of thematic working groups. The themes were: Theme Group 1: “The Wider Context” focused on the effects of the Paris Agenda on Aid Effectiveness on civil society work. Theme Group 2: “Power Relationships: Whose Narrative is Valid?” discussed power – within communities, and between development partners. Theme Group 3: “Understanding the Role of M&E” presented two very different approaches to M&E – the intuitive, embedded M&E
in a learning organisation, and the more formal results-based management. Theme Group 4, “Complexity and Simplicity” addressed issues of accountability and learning with reference to the logical framework matrix. Theme group 5, “Humanitarian Perspectives on M&E”, considered the impact of humanitarian disasters on local civil society, especially in relation to the media. The papers and presentations for the thematic groups can be found on http://www.intrac.org/pages/themepapers.html

These thematic groups were repeated on Tuesday so that each participant had a chance to join two thematic discussions.

After dinner on Monday, conference participants had a chance to delve into issues in more depth at a ‘café tables’ session. Participants sat around themed tables, each with a blank paper tablecloth, and wrote down interesting discussion points on the tablecloths as they arose. Some of the topics (suggested by participants) were ‘What does fifth generation M&E look like?’, ‘Hands-on examples of participatory M&E’, ‘How do we assess informal knowledge as M&E inputs?’ and ‘Where are we at with the Most Significant Change approach?’. The process notes are at http://www.intrac.org/pages/cafe.html

Each evening, participants could gather in ‘home groups’ and discuss their impressions of the programme and present their feedback to INTRAC facilitators. As far as possible, home group feedback was then incorporated into the following day’s programme. http://www.intrac.org/pages/homegroup.html

Tuesday began with feedback and adjustments to the programme, based on structured reporting-back from the home groups. The ideas arising from various sessions were also recorded visually, day by day, in a series of cartoons by INTRAC researcher Linda Lönnqvist.

Tuesday saw two regional workshop plenaries, presenting the findings from the regional workshops in Africa (Ghana, March 2005, see http://www.intrac.org/pages/ActionaidWorkshop.html) and Europe (Sweden, October 2005, see http://www.intrac.org/pages/SIDAWorkshop.html).

After a second round of thematic group discussions and reporting back, the conference moved to the dynamic ‘Speed Exchange’. Modelled on ‘speed dating’, this is a structured way to accelerate the professional connections that normally arise informally at meetings. Over an hour, participants spent an intensive five minutes getting to know ten other, randomly selected, conference-goers. Participants found they learned about unexpected aspects of each others’ work and made interesting connections. The process notes are at http://www.intrac.org/pages/speed.html.

There was a plenary session on Hot Topics in the afternoon: “Networking”, presented by Teobaldo Pinzas from ETC Andes, Peru, and “Lessons from the Tsunami: Two perspectives” where Hugh Goyder (consultant) presented the international view, and Padma Ratnayake (South Asia Partnership Sri Lanka) presented the local perspective. The Hot Topics papers and presentations can be accessed at http://www.intrac.org/pages/hot.html

The Wednesday was partly devoted to discussions of M&E approaches based on geographical groupings – see http://www.intrac.org/pages/geog.html for a basic process description. The aim was to articulate functioning methods, what does not work, and what could be done differently. Again, the programme was adapted according to the previous evening’s structured feedback sessions.

The African geographical session was very positive and life-affirming, with participants bringing out simple monitoring and planning tools (quarterly charts); examples where a taped report, circulated in the local languages enabled a community to take decisive action; exhortations to use more peer
reviewing; and the suggestion of using local FM radio and mobile phone-ins as instant evaluation methods.

At the Asian session, one of the main challenges identified was to scale-up micro-level successes of participatory M&E. Citizens’ monitoring was also mentioned as a positive example.

Europe was divided into three groups: Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Southern Europe, and Western Europe and North America. The Western Europeans/North Americans were struggling with their dual role as civil society actors and donors, and finding fault with their widespread failure to undertake M&E according to the needs of local partners. This was also, ultimately, considered a strength: NNGOs can act as a ‘buffer’ between large institutional donors and smaller NGOs, as rights advocates and as smaller donors. Northern NGOs need to reorient themselves to maintain their relevance: work with diaspora groups and the private sector, become comfortable as funders, remain sensitive to the wider global context, and budget time and money for actually learning from M&E. The ex-Eastern Block countries faced different problems: the main ones mentioned had to do with breaking away from a centralist mindset, dealing with the proliferation of donor demands, and finding its own road for the second world.

In contrast, the Latin American representatives were happy with their innovations, participation levels and cultural adaptability. They saw reason to improve their planning, to focus more, to take a more positive approach and learning from successes, and to make their M&E less donor-driven. They also flagged the need to actually think about the meaning and implications of popular buzzwords like empowerment, citizenship, rights and equality.

The Middle Eastern group pointed out that M&E should be flexible in an unstable political situation, such as the Palestinian Intifada. Organisations should be able to negotiate with their donors in such cases – it is worth assessing your relationship carefully. The ideal external evaluator would be a multidisciplinary team, combining critical distance with insight. A good example of a ‘reverse cascading’ evaluation was given for a network – each level of the network was evaluated separately.

After the geographical workshops, INTRAC used ‘Cascading’ methodology to establish key recommendations for the future from the conference and preceding regional workshops. Here, pairs of participants agreed on three key recommendations. The participants then merged into groups of four, again negotiating their three most important insights among themselves and discarding those statements that failed to ‘make the cut’. These groups merged again, to form groups of eight participants, negotiating which three insights were the most important. By the time the group size reached 16, participants simply ranked their six remaining insights in order of preference. This process had the purpose of 1) forcing participants to think hard about their priorities, 2) making it easy for participants to give up their ‘pet’ ideas when encountering better ideas from other groups, 3) preventing vocal or charismatic individuals from dominating the process, and 4) being exposed to a wide range of ideas and seeing their interconnections. Recommendations include: “Make all evaluation reports publicly available”, “Customise M&E to particular contexts”, and “Capitalise on increased flexibilities of donors around the use of different M&E approaches”. The instructions can be read on http://www.intrac.org/pages/key.html

Conference Outputs

The conference presented an opportunity for experienced M&E practitioners to gain exposure to insights from different geographical regions, to share experiences with each other and to debate topical issues. The most encouraging signs of innovation and change were that African practitioners presented confident, practical methods and looked beyond handed-down external mind-sets; the Europeans were actively dealing with their new roles in the changing aid
architecture; and that there was a sense that donors cannot be blamed any more for demanding formulaic ‘tick box’ evaluations – the freedom for more insightful M&E is beginning to be accepted, if we have the courage to exploit it.

The overall reaction from participants was positive, with mixed reactions about the process-oriented proceedings and plenary presentations. The interactive, participant-led elements were most appreciated.

The conference papers have been made available for participants on INTRAC's website for pre-conference preparation, and are still available for consultation on http://www.intrac.org/pages/6thevalConference.html

We are currently gathering the most interesting ideas and processes from the conference for wider distribution in the form of a publication.

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Linda Lönnqvist, INTRAC May 2006
ENDNOTES

1 Countries represented: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Denmark, the Gambia, Germany, Ghana, France, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Malawi, Nepal, the Netherlands, Norway, Palestine, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Uganda, UK, USA; Zambia, Zimbabwe.


3 Paper presented in Group 1: Brian Pratt: Paris Agenda; Aid Harmonization Efficiency versus Effectiveness. INTRAC, UK


6 Oliver Bakewell presented “Complexity and Simplicity: Addressing Accountability and Learning” on Swedish international development agency Sida’s logical framework review. Marie Barck and Beniam Gebrezghi presented the SIDA view.

7 Papers presented in Group 5 were Hugh Goyder: “What stops us learning? Some Reflections from recent Humanitarian Evaluations”, Aliya Salahuddin: “Assessing the Role of the Media in Humanitarian Disasters” International Media Corporation, Pakistan, and Jerry Adams: “A Paper Looking at the Role of the Media in Humanitarian Disasters and Questioning Whether they have a Role in Monitoring and Evaluation”, INTRAC, UK.