

Intrac's 5th Evaluation Conference
Measurement, management and accountability
31 March - 4 April 2003
KDK Conference Centre, the Netherlands

Dilemmas in RBM-oriented evaluation practices: back to the basics?

By Piet de Lange¹

1 Introduction

When Brian invited me to give a presentation at this conference he suggested that I should speak about the conflict between **top down** RBM type evaluations and participatory client-based ones. He gave the example of a civil servant supporting the idea of locally owned and conducted evaluations to promote learning in one situation, while in another supporting the idea of donors taking the MDGs and related targets as their development goals and ensuring that these are achieved within an internationally agreed time frame. The Conference information sheet says that I will be speaking about new developments in quality-based systems and criteria to assess Dutch NGOs.

I know that a more performance-driven approach to development cooperation can give rise to problems. This is evident at the Ministry where I work, and it is something I shall discuss today. But first I feel it is important to explore some underlying issues. I will round off by presenting some of the dilemmas the Ministry faces in its efforts to improve evaluation practices.

¹ Piet de Lange, senior evaluation specialist, DGIS/PM&E project team, Directorate-General for International Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This paper is being presented in a personal capacity.

The key questions underpinning my presentation are *How does RBM impact on development evaluations? What risks does it pose? What possible ways forward are there?* Is the link suggested by Brian between a top down approach and RBM unavoidable? After all, RBM should be introduced at the planning not the evaluation stage.

II Three worlds

Development is itself a complex process. And it is made even more complex by the many stakeholders that are involved in international development cooperation. They represent three different worlds: the South, the North and the development agents. The development agents include government organisations and NGOs in the South and the North. They act as if it were as liaisons between the other two worlds, with one foot in each. Ideally speaking, these three worlds are complementary to each other and work in close harmony. But in reality they often have different interests and disagree, and they have developed their individual institutional interests and bureaucracies. And just as these three worlds influence the way international development is shaped, they also influence evaluation practices.

What are the factors that put introduction of RBM into Dutch development cooperation under pressure?

1. Political factor

In the Netherlands we have seen government in retreat, hands-off government, downsizing, privatising and deregulating government, and now we have results oriented government. This process could be looked at as a prolonged effort of government to search for an appropriate response to fundamental changes taking place in society and the changing expectations of society vis-à-vis government. People expect public services to be delivered cost effectively. Here, the Netherlands lags behind countries like the UK, the USA and Canada. It is possible that the Netherlands has more reservations, while the RBM concept may not fit too well into the Dutch polder model which tends to reward compromise and collaboration rather than competition and individualism.

So while government is being encouraged to abandon traditional bureaucratic controls and ways of thinking, it is also being pressurised into introducing new forms of monitoring through performance accountability systems. Last month, 25 mayors signed a performance agreement with the Minister of the Interior to make the Netherlands safer.

Perceptions about development issues are changing in the Netherlands. People are beginning to recognise that developing countries are responsible for solving their own domestic problems and encouraging development. It is up to Northern development organisations to provide support, in the form of funding and knowledge. These changing perceptions have also led to a growing conviction that expenditure on development cooperation should yield tangible results. And even though the Dutch public recognises that development processes are complex and that there is no such thing as a quick fix, the Minister for Development Cooperation is under increasing pressure to perform.

2. Bureaucratic factor

Our national budget has been restructured. It is no longer based on disbursement but on performance. It is guided by three key questions: What do you want to achieve? What activities are you going to undertake? How much money are you going to spend? Every year, the government has to explain to parliament whether the results it envisaged have been achieved.

To accompany this shift in the budgeting system, the Ministry of Finance and the Court of Audit have published a set of guidelines on monitoring and evaluation. Now, every operational policy objective has to be evaluated every five years. There are more than 50 such objectives for foreign and development policy, and they will all have to be revised in the next few years so that they can be aligned with the strategic policy objectives and made specific enough to be monitored and evaluated.

3. International factor

There is growing international consensus on development objectives, which are increasingly converging. The same can also be said about the targets to measure their realisation. Allen Fowley has stressed the importance of the MDGs and I think he is absolutely right.

Interestingly, the Directorate-General for International Cooperation sees the MDGs as guidelines for intra-national reporting and they have not yet been adopted as objectives of Dutch development policy.

III Existing asymmetries in development evaluations

International development cooperation is by and large asymmetric by nature. This is particularly the case with evaluations. Let me mention two reasons.

- Evaluation methods originate from the social sciences which are embedded in Northern values and development paradigms and are calibrated to Northern scientific standards.
- It is the donors that usually commission or fund evaluations. In light of this, it would be interesting to examine how much of the total expenditure on evaluations is spent in developing countries and how many of the studies are done by evaluators from developing countries. Donors usually distance themselves from the evaluations, which would suggest that they are neutral actors. But this is not the case. Often donors are part of the problem. What is more, they have the power to determine what questions the evaluator will ask, and how the information will be collected and interpreted. Ultimately, they have the power to determine if the findings will be disseminated and to whom. When donors evaluate their own policies, they seldom invite Southern partners to give their views. Added to all that, the relationship between the donor and the evaluator is rarely challenged and tends to become close.

Esther Mabrahtu gives an interesting insight in her study on 8 UK-based International NGOs. She concludes that: *i)* there is a disturbing gap between how head offices and local offices perceive the key functions of M&E. This highlights the importance of communication about the objectives of the M&E process; *ii)* that M&E systems have been put in place without sufficient thought as to how information thus generated can be used to fulfil the demands of key actors (field staff and local actors) and strengthen institutional learning; *iii)* M&E is generally undertaken in an atmosphere of uncertainty and tension, so that reporting can sometimes involve ‘framing a story’

that adheres more closely to donor guidelines than to reality. She concludes that there is a clear argument for increased rigour at field level and the creation of an empowering organisational culture on a broader scale. Thus, to participate in critical decision-making, staff and organisations have to empower themselves. This may in turn require organisational change.

IV Effects of RBM on development evaluations

RBM incorporates features that may lead to even more asymmetric evaluations of international cooperation, since it bears the mark of the political, cultural and economic conditions of the industrial world in which it was invented. Many of these features have been touched on in the previous presentations, so I will only repeat those that are of particular importance to evaluations.

- RBM provides new opportunities for control.
- It tends to lead to more red tape, and new forms of bureaucracy.
- And it leads to more need for real time information.
- At the same time, RBM tends to favour developments that can be translated into measurable standards. So there is a risk that targets and performance indicators will oversimplify and distort development efforts.
- RBM stimulates learning in a non-traditional setting. However, learning tends to be performance-driven and favours uniformity.
- Finally, RBM tends towards over-commitment to scientific paradigms.

The extent to which these features will impact on development evaluations depends mainly on the relationship between the partners and whether they share a common vision of development and the complexities associated with the development process. This underscores the importance of the earliest stages of the partnership when the foundation is laid for whatever is to follow. I believe that introducing RBM tends to throw the main features of relationships into stark relief. If a relationship is hierarchical, RBM will reinforce that. If the partners maintain an open and symmetric relationship based on mutual respect and a desire to learn from and help each other, RBM can support that as

well. In this respect it is no different from any other technology. Its impact largely depends on who controls it.

More focus on learning

Development evaluation does not traditionally focus on learning. Historically, it inclines strongly towards vertical learning in combination with upward accountability. Usually it was - or should I say is? - the donors who want to have an evaluation conducted to find out what is going on in the field and whether their money has been well spent.

But if we are talking about learning from evaluations, important questions are: who is learning? how are they learning? and how can evaluations contribute to the learning process? As we have seen earlier, many evaluations are conducted to serve the needs of the donors. They use the results - if they use them at all - as *feedback* to adjust their policies and programmes. They then discuss or negotiate these changes with their Southern partners or impose them. If RBM-based evaluations are conducted in such a setting, they are very likely to enhance existing inequalities in the relationship and prevent Southern partners from learning.

An interesting alternative might be to participate in collective learning processes. This model is based on the assumption that development processes are the result of actions and interactions on the part of the various social actors. So the participation, capacity development and learning of all of these actors becomes a fundamental, rather than an instrumental condition. In this setting, Northern development agencies are partners in a group that consists mainly of Southern development agents. This setting may present opportunities to integrate RBM into planning, monitoring and evaluations in such a way as to enhance all partners' learning processes. It may help to create a common understanding if development partners learn together. Realising this potential calls for often fundamental changes on the part of the Northern partners. They have to give up their traditional role and authority and act much more as partners on an equal footing.

V Summary

Returning to my key questions, I would come to the following conclusions.

Performance management is not a panacea. It will not automatically remedy deficiencies in present reporting systems, nor will it compensate for our inability to learn. Technologies such as RBM have many inherent weaknesses which pose serious risks. They need to be recognised by the donors and managed in partnership with the various stakeholders. The main question is how RBM can be used as a vital, meaningful and trustworthy tool from which all stakeholders can benefit. For this to happen, partnerships need to demonstrate certain characteristics. They need to be symmetric, marked by mutual respect and transparency and primarily guided and maintained by authentic demand from the poor. Partners need to share the same vision of development and development strategies. And each of the participating development agents must be committed to applying performance management, and have the capacity to do so.

The following guidelines may help:

1. Ensure that the Southern partners more frequently take the initiative for evaluations and that more of them are conducted under their responsibility. Each partner should evaluate its own policies and performance as part of its responsibility for governance and management. This should reduce the vertical orientation of development evaluation where each party evaluates the performance of the next in line. It also implies a move to more internal evaluations. These evaluations should be conducted in such a way that they are independent and meet professional standards.
2. Stimulate more participatory types of evaluation. First, to assure that evaluation reports include the views of the poor and give their opinion on how agencies' development efforts have impacted on them. Second, to stimulate the learning process among stakeholders.

3. Ensure that the evaluations that are conducted under the responsibility of Southern partners are used in policy evaluations conducted by donors.
4. Contribute to the further development of capacity of agencies in the South to manage and conduct their own evaluations.
5. Ensure that the programme documents contain adequate guidelines for evaluations. Otherwise, evaluators will have to reconstruct the assumptions and theories that are supposed to connect impact, outcome and output.
6. Introduce a system of quality assessment for evaluations that does justice to the particular purposes for which and the circumstances under which they are conducted.

Thank you.

References: