



PraxisNote No. 15

'Quick and Dirty' Evaluation of Capacity Building

Using Participatory
Exercises

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Introduction

A couple of years ago I was asked to document and evaluate a capacity building process that had taken place in the Tangababwe Red Cross Society (TRCS). The aim of the exercise was two-fold:

1. to write up the change process as a case study for TRCS and other Red Cross societies to learn from
2. to begin the process of assessing the impact of the work

With only three days to collect all the data I had a considerable methodological challenge.

This PraxisNote describes my response to the challenge in the hope that it will stimulate ideas and show that even 'quick and dirty' evaluations can prove useful – and are certainly better than nothing. All too frequently our laudable efforts to ensure methodological rigour and validity in our evaluation of capacity building processes end up in endless planning and eventually impossible budgets and time commitments.

I will start by briefly describing the situation in TRCS that led to the capacity building interventions.

Capacity Building in the Tangababwe Red Cross Society

In three years the Tangababwe Red Cross Society (TRCS) was transformed from being on the point of collapse into a vibrant, dynamic and growing organisation. But in late 1997, TRCS was in an acute crisis. This once-proud and highly-respected institution had its reputation in tatters. According to staff, they had very poor quality projects scattered all over the country. Staff were incensed by the Secretary General's management style, vividly described by a number of them as 'hell-raising', 'militaristic', 'coercive' and 'iron-fisted'.

All but one donor had deserted, staff were demonstrating on the streets and TRCS were in the media headlines for all the wrong reasons. There were even rumours of sexual abuse in the office.

An official inquiry was launched by the board and important changes in the two main TRCS leadership positions took place in 1998 with a new Secretary General appointed and a new Chair of the National Executive Council. Stimulated by their participation on an International Federation of the Red Cross/Crescent (IFRC) workshop on 'Governance', the new leadership embarked on a comprehensive organisational change process for TRCS.

Over the next three years critical issues of governance, vision, mission, strategy, job evaluation, restructuring and constitutional reform were addressed:

- On the governance side there was a series of eight provincial workshops that culminated in a 'supreme' workshop for the TRCS board. This prioritised key changes needed by TRCS.
- TRCS developed a consolidated strategy and identified its 'core business' through regional and national workshops facilitated by a local consultancy.
- A job evaluation and restructuring process was carried out in a very participatory way by PriceWaterhouse Coopers.
- A new Constitution was developed and ratified.

TRCS invested considerable amounts of time and the IFRC invested considerable amounts of money in this organisational change process and they felt it important to take stock and start to analyse systematically what the impact of all this had been.

What were the objectives of the evaluation?

The key questions to answer were:

- What has changed in TRCS? And by how much?
- To what extent can these changes be plausibly associated with the different change interventions?
- How have the impacts of these changes been felt at beneficiary level?
- Has this investment been cost-effective?
- What were the key success factors and constraints in this change?
- Where does the change process in TRCS go from here?

What methodologies were used?

Given the limited time-frame I chose to collect data in three main ways:

- Semi-structured interviews of key stakeholders in the capital
- A one-day workshop for TRCS staff from the provinces
- Secondary data such as consultancy reports from the capacity building interventions

In consultation with TRCS and IFRC, we carefully selected the respondents for the semi-structured interviews. They included a cross-section of TRCS head-office leadership and staff; the President and Vice-President of the National Executive Council and one of the consultants involved in the capacity building work.

This information was complemented by a one-day workshop for ten participants from the provinces (including provincial board members, programme officers, youth leaders and youth members). At this workshop a number of participative exercises were used, including:

- **Capacity-ranking** of TRCS. Participants were split into two groups and were asked to 'identify ten aspects of a healthy Red Cross Society'. Their responses were synthesised into a single consolidated list. Using a non-numerical scoring system (with pictures of a seed; seedling; young growth; maturing; harvesting), participants then ranked TRCS both before and after the change process. This outlined the areas where staff felt the most significant changes had occurred. By then attributing numbers 1–5 to the different pictures, the perceived scale of the changes could also be analysed.

- A **time-line** of TRCS. In three groups participants were asked to draw a time-line on flip chart pages of the history of TRCS over the last ten years noting both highs and lows. The groups presented their analysis to each other allowing me to see where the different capacity building interventions were placed in a longer historical time-frame. If a capacity building intervention was mentioned by all groups as having been very positive for TRCS then it was reasonable to assume that intervention had had a significant impact. But if a capacity building process was not mentioned at all, then its impact was questionable. The time-line also enabled us to see the role and significance of other events, such as renewed donor interest or a new leader.
- **Impact analysis** of interventions at beneficiary level. Participants were asked to identify in two groups the range of positive and negative impacts that the different interventions had had at the level of the ultimate beneficiaries (not on the TRCS as an organisation). They were also asked to justify their statements. This process gave some insight into perceived changes at grassroots level and allowed the possibility for later follow-up with beneficiaries should evaluation resources have permitted.

What capacities changed?

The interviews with staff and board outlined a number of changes which occurred in TRCS in the last three years. They highlighted shifts in:

Organisational Culture

An organisation's culture is one of the most deep-rooted and difficult things to change and yet it seems there have been

dramatic changes in the organisational culture of TRCS. The rock-bottom morale of 1997 and early 1998 exemplified by the demonstrations, frequent disciplinary cases and absenteeism has given way to a much more positive and harmonious atmosphere. Recognition for staff has improved. *'In the past if you were not in the right books you were out'*, said one. *'There was no acknowledgement for excellent work – so why bother? Good performance is now recognised.'* Staff and volunteers are no longer ashamed of having the Red Cross on their vehicles, but are prepared to make huge investments of time with long evenings and weekends to make TRCS a more effective organisation.

Strategy

Another key change is that TRCS now has a clear strategy. This strategy is owned by the board, staff and volunteers. The main points of the plan adorn the headquarters office and staff look up to the framed statements with pride. *'In our management and board meetings no-one will say anything outside of the strategy document'* said the Secretary General. More importantly the strategic plan is being implemented. The focus on core business *'has helped us concentrate on things which matter – which has enabled us to achieve our targets in these areas'*. Hard decisions have been taken to close down some programmes like Community-based Rehabilitation, Women in Development and Blood Collection – important decisions which most NGOs evade.

Governance

Governance has significantly improved with board and management roles clearly defined. *'Governance now keeps to policy issues and management to implementation.'* There is greater (though not perfect) harmony in the national board, and *'members who are known to be unable to attend board meetings are asked for their views in advance'*.

Roles and Responsibilities

Roles and responsibilities amongst staff have been clarified through the restructuring and job evaluation process. *'We have been able to reduce – even eliminate duplication. It has saved us money because we have streamlined jobs.'* Reporting lines are much clearer than they used to be whereas previously, *'this used to confuse things tremendously'*.

Policies and Guidelines

Policies and guidelines have already been established in a number of areas, such as: youth, disaster, training, HIV/AIDS and employment regulations.

Donor Confidence

While in the past local donors did not support TRCS due to its poor reputation, after the change process they became so plentiful that the Secretary General had to schedule all presentation ceremonies on Tuesdays to avoid it taking all her time. When the February 2000 cyclone hit, Barclays' Bank wanted to support the relief effort so they asked for a TRCS brochure. When they found 'Disaster Preparedness and Response' as one of the core business areas they agreed their money should go the Red Cross and they persuaded other businesses to follow suit. International donors too have much more confidence and turnover is now double what it was in 1997.

Delivery

All these improvements are limited, however, unless they are passed down to the ultimate beneficiaries. The increased focus has meant *'targets are met and resources are available...and people are able to be measured against their targets'*. With regard to the Disaster Preparedness and Response programme, TRCS was *'featured in the media coverage of the cyclone and labelled to have handled it very well. The contribution of the volunteers was especially commended'* – a result of the improved understanding of different roles.

By how much did capacity change?

During the one day workshop, participants identified the organisational capacities needed and then scored and analysed the changes (as described earlier). The key organisational capacities that participants felt that any Red Cross society needs were:

- a clear vision, and mission
- a good strategic plan
- a functional structure
- effective top leadership
- sound financial base management
- good quality staff
- good communications
- networking with others
- a sound constitution
- a strong volunteer base
- policies and regulations

Through the process of **capacity ranking** they reconstructed a baseline by analysing the situation before the change process in 1997 and scoring TRCS against these capacities. They then scored the present situation at TRCS. As a result participants were able to analyse which capacities had changed and by how much:

Organisational Capacity	Scores out of 25	Improvement since 1997
Vision, Mission	6 ⇒ 24	300%
Strategy	8 ⇒ 23	187%
Networking	9 ⇒ 24	167%
Communication	7 ⇒ 18	129%
Policies	11 ⇒ 21	90%
Finances	9 ⇒ 16	77%
Staffing	15 ⇒ 19	27%
Leadership	16 ⇒ 20	25%
Structure	16 ⇒ 20	25%
Constitution	20 ⇒ 24	20%
Volunteers	17 ⇒ 20	18%

Can the changes be associated with the capacity building?

Early in the evaluation it became clear that that significant capacity changes had taken place in TRCS. However, what was less clear was to what degree these changes could be 'plausibly associated' with the different capacity building interventions used, such as the governance training, the strategic planning and the work on job evaluation and restructuring. It may have been that other factors caused the changes in TRCS and that they may have occurred even without the different interventions.

One way of gaining some clarity on this issue without having to ask direct questions was by carrying out the **time-line** exercise. At the provincial workshop participants identified the positive and negative significant events over the last 10 years. Between 1993 and 1997 only negative events were mentioned and one participant referred to them as 'the dark years' of suspension of donor funds; top-down restructuring; non-consensus policies; withdrawal of some officers; 'rife' nepotism; non-existent youth wings with no meetings or formal reporting; deteriorating management-employee-volunteer relationships; no strategies or evaluations; and programmes that were 'cut off from beneficiaries'.

In late 1997 the first of the organisational change interventions started. From 1998 onwards the time-line became much more positive. The events that were noted between the low point of the 'dark ages' and the recent buoyancy were:

- establishment of workers committees
- commission set up to look into management-worker relationships
- election of a new president
- confirmation of the new Secretary General
- strategic planning process

- governance training workshops
- staff development programme
- beneficiaries waking up and demanding better services from TRCS

It was seen that these changes were consolidated by the recent work on:

- programme planning
- development of policy documents
- the restructuring process

At a provincial level TRCS staff perceived that considerable positive change had taken place. The changes had a multiplicity of causes, but the different change interventions were all mentioned in the time-line. This implied that the capacity building interventions played a significant role in the resulting changes in TRCS. These findings from the workshop were strongly corroborated by the interviews from head office. The different interviews all emphasised the value and significance of the capacity building interventions.

Has this made a difference to the ultimate beneficiaries?

The internal changes in TRCS ultimately only matter if the improvements in organisation mean that the beneficiaries of TRCS ('the most vulnerable groups') receive better services from TRCS. This is the 'acid test' of a capacity building programme and can only really be ascertained through time-consuming assessment at grassroots level. The representatives from the provinces did highlight a number of improvements at beneficiary level which had occurred as a result of the change process. These would obviously need to be verified through participative data gathering from the beneficiaries themselves.

At the workshop staff and board members from the various provinces were asked to outline how they felt the internal changes in TRCS had ultimately impacted upon the beneficiaries. This information could then be verified with communities in the future.

The staff consulted felt that as a result of the governance workshops:

- there was greater beneficiary involvement and ownership in the development of programmes
- beneficiaries have gained more power in the decision-making process
- staff spend more time implementing TRCS programmes rather than being unclear about what their roles and responsibilities are or even being in conflict with other TRCS people.

The work on the mission, vision, and strategy improved both the quality of work with the beneficiaries as well as the quantity:

- the quality and depth of programmes improved as more attention and assistance were accorded to most vulnerable groups, benefits were more focused and less spread over a wide area. Leadership and staff were clearer about their core business and could concentrate on that.
- better networking with others meant that TRCS beneficiaries were able to receive more support from other organisations involved in related fields such as home-based care and education.
- the quantity of work that TRCS was able to do with beneficiaries increased considerably as donor confidence, both locally and internationally, was revived and hence more resources were available.

As a result of the job evaluation and restructuring:

- beneficiaries receive support in a more timely fashion. With one person clearly responsible, problems are solved rather than passed on.
- staff performance has improved as they spend more of their time on programme work with beneficiaries which has led to more effective service delivery. Staff performance has improved and job satisfaction, morale, and commitment have gone up as people are clearer about what they should be doing and why. Internal conflict and duplication has been reduced.
- beneficiaries are reassured that TRCS is able to place professionally qualified people in the right positions.

Has the capacity building been cost-effective?

An initial attempt was made with the TRCS example to explore the issue of whether it was cost-effective.

In broad terms the direct financial costs of the capacity building processes were:

Governance process:	\$ 8,333
Strategic planning	\$20,000
Job evaluation	<u>\$24,000</u>
A total direct cost of over	US \$50,000

Set against these direct capacity building costs of US\$50,000, one of the benefits has been a significant increase in income generated. Between 1997 and 2000 TRCS income increased by almost US\$ 2 million annually.

If these improvements were projected to continue over the next ten years, the funding for the change process has undoubtedly been cost-effective. Even if the capacity building processes had only contributed 50% of the improvement (with other events contributing the rest), this would still mean that \$1 million of the increased TRCS income could be

attributed to the impacts of the capacity building interventions. If this figure was projected over 10 years the cost/benefit ratio would be an impressive 1:200.

Conclusion

It must be stressed that this was only meant to be the start of an impact assessment process. The data gathering time was extremely limited – enough to get a feel for what has changed and to begin to assess the scope of the change, but not enough to validate and triangulate the findings. While it was possible to identify which policies have been introduced, it was not possible to assess the extent to which they are being used and understood. Furthermore it should be pointed out that impact is ‘in the eye of the beholder’ and different people will have different perspectives on this. In so far as the process has focused more on TRCS staff based in the capital it may be more biased towards their opinions.

If I could do things differently in future, I would have insisted on having more time for data gathering and so be able to cross-check and validate findings with different groups of respondents.

The experience also showed me the value of using participatory exercises in workshops to involve people in quantifying the extent of change through ranking and scoring. Even if these figures are highly subjective and subject to considerable qualification, they can provide those donors who only report (and think) in numbers with the information they need. The time-line exercise was also extremely valuable in being able to situate the capacity building interventions within the changes in the context – allowing us to plausibly associate (if not directly attribute) organisational change with the capacity building interventions.

This experience showed me, however, that even with very limited time a ‘quick and dirty’ evaluation of capacity building work can generate useful information. Sometimes the best is the enemy of the good and by holding out for the very best in evaluation, we end up by doing nothing. The ‘best’ becomes too costly and unwieldy. Our actual experiences of monitoring and evaluating our capacity building work are still very rare. It is much better for us to start to do some things, albeit ‘quick and dirty’ and subject to qualification, than to debate endlessly on the frightening complexity of evaluating capacity building. We have so much to learn, not just about capacity building, but about the process of assessing its impact. By trying something we at least have information and experience to learn from.