



## **CONFLICT RESOLUTION EVALUATION MEETING SESSION SUMMARIES**

July 4-5, 2002  
Held at INCORE  
Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland

## INCORE

Conflicts of an ethnic, religious, political and cultural nature continue to dominate the world's attention. Since 1990, over 150 wars have taken place, most of which are re-current, protracted and intra-state, and there is little evidence that such conflicts will decrease significantly over the coming decades. Ninety percent of our states are now multi-identity states and most governments are having difficulty dealing positively with such diversity.

Addressing the causes, effects, solutions and post-settlement impacts of such wars has been the role of the UNU Institute for Conflict Resolution at the University of Ulster (INCORE) since it was established in 1993. INCORE is a joint research institute of the United Nations University and the University of Ulster. It seeks to address the management and resolution of contemporary conflicts through research, training, practice, policy and theory. INCORE's vision is of a world where the knowledge and skills exist to make non-military management of ethno-political conflict the norm.

The *Research Unit* undertakes, commissions and supervises research of a multidisciplinary nature, particularly on post-settlement issues, governance and diversity, and research methodology in violent societies. The *Policy and Evaluation Unit* is committed to bridging the gaps between theory, practice and policy. It seeks to ensure that conflict-related research and practice is incorporated into grassroots programming and governmental policy.

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*Cheyenne Church & Julie Shouldice*  
*Meeting Co-Coordinator*



**Conflict Resolution Evaluation Meeting  
4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> July 2002**

**SESSION SUMMARIES**

The Conflict Resolution & Evaluation (CRE) Meeting was an outcome of INCORE's pilot project Conflict Resolution Evaluation: The State of the Art. The CRE Meeting was designed to further the thinking and practice of evaluation methodology in the field of conflict resolution. It was hosted by INCORE at Aberfoyle House, University of Ulster, Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland on Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> and Friday 5<sup>th</sup> July 2002. Twenty-four people were selected to participate in the meeting.

The Conflict Resolution Evaluation (CRE) Meeting focused on three themes – Impact, Conducting CR Evaluations and Utilisation of Evaluation. A number of discussion sessions were assigned to each theme. Participants were invited to attend the session of their choosing and were not obliged to follow all the sessions relating to any one particular theme.

The following document contains summaries of the discussions held during each session, arranged according to theme. These summaries are purposefully brief and are designed to highlight the key questions and issues raised by the group. If an issue raised in one session was also raised in another, a link has been made to the other relevant session where possible. Please note that these summaries do *not* constitute a transcript of the CRE Meeting and that the views in this document are not necessarily those of all the participants.

**Contents**

**Theme I: Impact**

**Pages 4-9**

- Session 1: Success & Failure
- Session 2: 'Transfer'
- Session 3: Assessing the Impact of a Project in the Short, Medium and Long-Term
- Session 4: Macro-Evaluation

**Theme II: Conducting Conflict Resolution Evaluations**

**Pages 10-12**

- Session 1: Indicators & Criteria
- Session 2: Conflict Contexts & 'Locals' in Conflict Resolution Evaluation
- Session 3: Evaluator to Revolutionary: Level of Involvement?

**Theme III: Utilisation of Evaluation**

**Pages 13-15**

- Session 1: Internal Use of Evaluation
- Session 2: External Use of Evaluation
- Session 3: Testing Theories of Change

## **Theme I: IMPACT**

### **Summary of Sessions 1-4**

- Session 1: Success & Failure
- Session 2: 'Transfer'
- Session 3: Assessing the Impact of a Project in the Short, Medium and Long-Term
- Session 4: Macro-Evaluation

#### **Session 1: Success & Failure**

##### **Key Questions**

- **Has the field of conflict resolution (CR) reached a commonly agreed definition of success and failure?**

Participants noted that funders, practitioners and evaluators often have competing visions as to what constitutes success and failure, which makes these concepts particularly difficult to define for the purposes of evaluation. The common assessment of success and failure as the mere absence or presence of violence does not adequately define the scope of these terms. At a project level, evaluators also need to consider that these meanings may change over time, as 'good practice' often requires the enactment of midstream adjustments in response to sudden changes in context. Evaluators must also be prepared to adjust their own perceptions of what constitutes success and failure. Finally, evaluators need to remain aware that concepts of success and failure may prove subject to the 'revisionism of the winners' in post-conflict situations.

- **Can CR evaluators measure success and failure?**

The use of tools such as baseline data and longitudinal comparison does not always provide conflict resolution evaluators with adequate information to provide a measure of success and failure. It was suggested that, in order to address this challenge, CR evaluation needs to encompass new ways of thinking about success and failure that rely to a greater degree on connections and processes rather than the achievement of black and white goals.

- **What should the response be to an evaluation that suggests a project is a success or a failure?**

Rather than attempting to judge projects in absolute terms, CR evaluators need to be able to recognise *degrees* of success and failure and reflect these in the evaluation report. However, should a project appear to be predominantly a success or failure, the field needs to consider both who should respond and how. In the case of a success, does that mean that the project has reached its goals and is now finished? In the case of an apparent failure, should the project simply be shut down? What should happen when an individual project is successful, yet the overall objective is a failure?

##### **Related Issues**

- **Underdeveloped theories**

Members of the group felt that CR evaluation had been particularly challenging because the field of conflict resolution has not fully developed its theories (see also Utilisation of Evaluation, Session 3: Testing Theories of Change). Evaluators need to be more aware of the theories of change that they adhere to, especially when approaching an evaluation. Practitioners also need to develop this awareness by making their theories of change and underlying assumptions more explicit.

- **Role of the evaluator** (see also Impact, Session 2: 'Transfer' & Conducting CR Evaluations, Session 2: Conflict Contexts & Locals)

It was suggested that an apt metaphor for the CR evaluator would be that of a family doctor. As such, the evaluator would not attempt to act 'objectively' and remain distanced from the project, but would engage in an ongoing and supportive relationship with practitioners. Several members of the group

felt that the opportunity exists for the evaluator to take on the role of an interactive actor by feeding information back to organisations and projects, enabling them to improve their effectiveness.

- **Difficulties & hindrances to evaluation**

The evaluator may be constrained in the information they can use in an evaluation because of the confidentiality of the information provided by practitioners and project participants (see also Utilisation of Evaluation, Session 2: External Use). Moreover, because CR work involves some activities of a highly secretive nature, information of relevance to the evaluator may never come to light.

## **Session 2: 'Transfer'**

### **Key Questions**

- **What does the concept of 'transfer'<sup>1</sup> mean for CR evaluation?**

As an emerging issue in CR evaluation, members of the group suggested a few nascent meanings of the term 'transfer'. These included:

- i) The diffusion of knowledge,
- ii) 'The expanding element of CR work',
- iii) The impact of learning derived from specific interventions on different contexts.

Participants considered three levels of 'transfer': within the field of CR; from other fields to the field of CR; and from the micro level to the macro level. It was suggested that understanding the meaning of 'transfer' for CR evaluation involves considering what overall objectives -for example 'peace'- the field is working towards. An awareness of the field's objectives is important because it is only as a contribution towards achieving these ends that the concept of 'transfer' is of relevance.

### **Key Issues**

- **Evaluating 'Transfer Strategies':**

It was suggested that understanding the strategies adopted by projects to encourage 'transfer' could help widen and deepen the impact of other CR projects, which itself would promote further 'transfer'. In order to evaluate 'transfer' strategies, the evaluator is required to attribute causality. Evaluators must first determine how and if 'transfer' has occurred. The evaluator must then decide whether the project under review is responsible. The field of CR currently lacks the necessary tools by which to measure 'transfer'. However, 'transfer' has been mapped in other fields (e.g. in the media, in communications and in public discourse). It should, therefore, be possible to map 'transfer' in the field of CR. It was suggested that measuring 'transfer' is, in part, a question of measuring the sustainability of project impact. This can be done through comparisons with baseline data and so forth.

- **Obstacles to 'transfer'**

Members of the group commented that competition between agencies within the field of CR often constrains 'transfer'. Such competition may prevent the diffusion of knowledge and sharing of experiences. (See also Utilisation of Evaluation, Session 2: External Use & Impact).

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<sup>1</sup> Concept used in Kelman, Herbert C. (no date) *The Contributions of Non-Governmental Organizations to the Resolution of International Conflicts: An Approach to Evaluation*. Massachusetts: Harvard University.

- **Negative Transfer:**

It was also noted that 'transfer' is not necessarily a positive phenomenon. The concept of 'negative transfer' was raised, whereby the negative impacts of projects have ripple effects beyond their immediate context and beneficiaries. An example given was that of participants in a project failing to transfer their transformation to their peers and suffering alienation as a result.

#### **Related Issues**

- **Project claims and funder demands**

CR projects sometimes make grandiose or exaggerated claims about what they can expect to achieve. A common assertion is their ability to impact upon a wider population beyond the immediate project participants (i.e. 'transfer'). Such claims tend to attract larger amounts of funding. Members of the group suggested that the field as a whole needs to recognise more realistic project goals and objectives. To prevent the inflation of project claims, funders must avoid bombarding projects with questions about whether they have achieved the impossible. Projects in turn must both take greater ownership of their goals and better articulate them to funders.

- **Role of the Evaluator** (see also Impact, Session 1: Success & Failure & Conducting CR Evaluations, Session 2: Conflict Contexts & Locals)

Evaluators are often given goals to evaluate by funders that are different to those of the project. Given that the evaluator's professional livelihood tends to depend on the funder, this puts the evaluator in an extremely difficult position. By evaluating according to goals set by the funder, the evaluator is likely to appear as an 'outsider' to the project and therefore encounter resistance or mistrust. Members of the group felt that a code of ethics should therefore be developed for CR evaluators. Such a code might enable evaluators to better position themselves between competing project and funder demands, as well as better meet the expectations of all stakeholders.

### **Session 3: Assessing the Impact of a Project in the Short, Medium and Long Term**

#### **Key Questions**

- **Why evaluate conflict resolution projects?**

There is a common misperception that evaluations are only undertaken as result of funder demands. However, CR evaluation could be important as a source of validation for the field as a whole. Members of the group noted that, in general, both practitioners and funders are committed to improving the effectiveness of agencies and programmes. Therefore both could potentially value evaluation as a tool for advancement of the work (see also Utilisation of Evaluation, Session 1: Internal Use).

- **Why does the field dislike discussing evaluation?**

It was noted that the field of conflict resolution was established in opposition to realist theories that focused on power dynamics. Some suggested that the field has therefore tended to avoid addressing issues of power in order to remain distinct from realist discourse. It was also stated that the field has tended to avoid macro level evaluation because of the possibility that such evaluation could show conflict resolution work to be of little significance. Group members also noted that practitioners often have less idealistic perceptions of success than the field in general and evaluators in particular. As a result, at the micro level, projects rarely express interest in macro level evaluation. Moreover, the evaluation of projects according to evaluators' idealistic perceptions of success has led projects to fear and resist evaluation. It was noted that a number of influential evaluators have recently exchanged their idealistic concepts of success for more realistic notions.

- **What does short, medium and long-term mean for CR evaluation?**

It is important to consider whether the concepts of short, medium and long-term can be applied to CR evaluation. There is not only confusion as to how these concepts should be defined in the conflict context but also as to whether these time frames are relevant and useful in the consideration of societal change.

In order for the findings to be most useful, it is best to engage in evaluation at an early stage in the project life cycle (see also Conducting CR Evaluations, Session 2: Conflict Contexts & 'Locals'). When assessing the short-term impacts of a project, evaluators need to focus upon the immediate outcomes of a project as well as the project's explicitly stated goals. When assessing the medium term impacts of a project, it was suggested that evaluations contribute to projects by providing feedback on how they could be improved. It was also suggested that at this stage evaluations become more exploratory. Assessing the impact of a project becomes increasingly difficult as the time frame lengthens and the 'ripple effects' of a project become harder to discern from other societal factors. Nonetheless, members of the group considered it important that evaluators try to ascertain how projects at the micro level are able to cumulatively move their effects into the macro level.

### **Related Issues**

- **Evaluation methodology and design**

It was recognised that with the variety of project activities and durations, different evaluation techniques and methods must be employed. Members of the group considered it particularly important that evaluations 'do no harm' and that all evaluations be designed with care. The issue of the evaluator's ethical responsibility was raised; for example, whether an evaluator should be held responsible for negotiating questionable terms of reference with funders. Group members suggested that if evaluators were to act as 'ethical gatekeepers', they could endanger their professional livelihood, which is contingent upon the funder.

### **Session 4: Macroevaluation**

#### **Key Questions**

- **How should 'macro' be defined for the purposes of conflict resolution evaluation?**

There was considerable discussion about how to define 'macro'. Whilst the group failed to reach a conclusion, a number of participants offered valuable contributions:

- If the macro is to be differentiated from the micro, defining the macro means setting parameters. It was noted that setting any type of parameters is especially difficult in the conflict context.
- The difference between microeconomics and macroeconomics is the difference between the firm and the market. By analogy, a useful definition of 'macro' for the purposes of CR evaluation might be *societal context* whether that context be a country, region etc.
- It was suggested that 'considering the macro' meant considering the interplay of systems.

The field needs to play with different concepts of what constitutes the 'macro' and different frameworks for macroevaluation. Members of the group felt that defining the 'macro' could not be divorced from defining the 'micro'. Indeed it was suggested that what the field really needs to do is examine and come to terms with the relationship between the micro and macro.

- **Why do we need macroevaluation?**

- 1) In order to bring people working on many different levels together as a field, the impact of projects and actors needs to be assessed not only horizontally but also vertically. Due to the perceptions that there is more power at the macro level, macroevaluation may be an important means by which to improve the micro level's ability to access and leverage this power. Macroevaluation could perhaps help micro level projects to 'look upwards'. It was noted however, that this depends on why macro-evaluations are being carried out and for whom.



- 2) The field of CR often claims to contribute towards the achievement of grand objectives such as 'peace'. Evaluation at the macro level may offer a way to substantiate these claims. It is, however, important for the field to ask itself whether conflict resolution activities should be measured against an ideal state such as 'peace' in the first place.
- 3) Similarly, it was considered important to try and measure the contribution of micro level CR projects to such ideals. It was noted that conflict resolution evaluation often demonstrates how projects have successfully reached their micro goals, yet this does not necessarily mean they are fulfilling their macro or external roles.
- 4) Finally, members of the group felt that when there is a 'good enough'<sup>2</sup> conflict resolution outcome at the macro level, then it is of obvious interest to the field as a whole to investigate how this outcome came about. Such an investigation would need to take into account not only micro level projects but also macro level events and issues.

- **How can macroevaluation be carried out?**

It was noted that when carrying out a macroevaluation, it is not enough to simply 'add up' projects at the micro level. Vertical intervening variables must also be taken into account. Evaluators need to consider what scale, methods, actors, disciplines and limits to make use of during a macroevaluation. There is, therefore, a pressing need for experimental designs of macro-evaluations. It was stated that macroevaluation requires evaluators to demonstrate the occurrence of micro-macro cascading. Members of the group pointed out that attribution becomes harder for evaluators as they move up the impact chain. In order to better understand the influence of the micro upon the macro and vice versa it might be useful to bring together practitioners from a variety of sectors and fields. This group could then discuss macro level issues, what is being done about those issues and how each practitioner's work is affected by these issues.

### **Key Issues**

- **The danger of macroevaluation**

Members of the group expressed concern that the wrong assumptions about a conflict, particularly at the macro level could lead to the wrong solutions being proposed. It is therefore important to ensure that the micro level continues to inform the macro, especially during macroevaluation. It was also noted that there remains a danger of judging micro projects to be irrelevant based on a macro analysis, despite their significant impact at the local level. Participants also expressed concern that as macro-evaluation involves bringing people together from many different disciplines and sectors there is a danger that it will produce a lowest common denominator analysis.

- **DFID & Strategic Conflict Assessment (SCA)**

The group discussed a macro analysis carried out by a DFID multidisciplinary team of five insiders and outsiders on the basis of a three-week field visit. This was not an evaluation *per se*, but an examination of responses and an assessment of these responses against a particular framework. It was noted that for the analysis to work, agencies had to be prepared to relinquish authority and be evaluated. The demand for the analysis was from DFID, triggered by an escalating conflict situation.

#### **The Methodology**

- 1) The macro-context was broken down into sectors (economic, political, security issues, etc.) and the dynamics between these were examined.
- 2) International responses to the conflict situation were considered.
- 3) The question was then asked: what does this mean for strategies associated with DFID? Answers were developed into a series of options; for example, 'there needs to be a pot of money available for fast response,' or 'there needs to be more work carried out with human rights organisations.'

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<sup>2</sup> Term used in Ross, M.H. (2000) 'Good enough isn't so bad: thinking about success and failure in ethnic conflict management.' *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, volume 6, number 1.

The group noted several relevant features of DFID's analysis. Firstly, it was noted that SCA was designed to address the question of whether conflict resolution was less or more than the sum of its parts. The analysis was designed to systematise what field workers do, thereby enabling them to be as effective as possible. Secondly, it was noted that a joint analysis such as SCA does not necessarily result in a joint response to its conclusions. Finally, it was suggested that SCA has a range of potential uses and abuses. In particular, it is important that such analysis does not become a type of recipe/prescription book applicable to any conflict situation. It was felt, however, that such analysis *could lead* to valuable prescriptions as long as the study was kept live and relevant precautions taken.

- **Evaluation Design**

It was noted that, above all, evaluations need to be designed with care and should 'do no harm'. Once again group members suggested that a code of ethics be developed for conflict resolution evaluators to alleviate these concerns (see also Utilisation of Evaluation, Session 4: Level of Involvement).

## **Theme II: CONDUCTING CR EVALUATIONS**

### **Summary of Sessions 1-3**

- Session 1: Indicators & Criteria
- Session 2: Conflict Contexts & Locals in CR Evaluation
- Session 3: Evaluator to Revolutionary: Level of Involvement?

#### **Session 1: Indicators & Criteria**

##### **Key Questions**

- **What is the definition of an ‘indicator?’**

Members of the group differed on the exact definition of indicators. Many agreed that further debate about the ‘hard vs. soft’ definition of indicators was necessary, as a standardised definition of indicators is not used in the field. It was also suggested that indicators should be carefully distinguished from objectives. Though indicators may indicate change, they do not explain *why* the change occurred. The question of whether the definition of indicators should also incorporate context was raised. Most members agreed that indicators are defined and formed prior to any change in context but questioned whether they should be redefined during or after a change in context.

- **Is a standardised definition really needed?**

It was agreed that a standardised definition of indicators would be useful only as a guideline because there must be room for context-specific indicators. It was also noted that narrow definitions of indicators not only limit evaluators, but they also exclude participants.

- **How does politics factor in the selection of criteria and indicators?**

The group discussed the political motives that lie behind the criteria and indicators set by the evaluators and/or the funders of an evaluation. The majority of the group agreed that the question of who determines criteria and defines indicators would have an immense impact not only on the evaluation itself but also on whether the evaluation can be deemed a ‘success’ or a ‘failure’ (see also [Impact, Session 1: Success & Failure](#)). Group members commented on the danger of allowing/using indicators defined solely by the funder but also recognised the limitations of exclusively evaluator-defined indicators.

- **Should stakeholders be included in indicator selection?**

The possibility of consulting participants during the formulation of indicators was discussed at several points, with emphasis on the fact that participants are often left out of evaluation design. Many members agreed that, where possible, it was important to include all stakeholders in the process of defining indicators and criteria. It was acknowledged that the process of selecting indicators is perhaps just as important as the indicators ultimately selected. Many recognised that, while no set of indicators could be completely void of bias, the inclusion of practitioners and participants in the formulation process would help to mitigate perceptions of evaluator bias.

##### **Key Issues**

- **Redefining Indicators during Evaluation**

It was suggested that evaluators should be explicit about the initial set of indicators to be used during the evaluation but that they should remain open to the inclusion of new definitions/new indicators throughout evaluation.

- **Qualitative vs. Quantitative Indicators**

Many group members strongly agreed that evaluation was becoming a ‘prisoner’ to demands for quantitative evidence and voiced the opinion that it is often difficult to completely separate the qualitative from the quantitative. It was largely agreed that both types of evidence are necessary but

that many evaluations, particularly those based on funder-defined criteria, focus upon quantitative evidence.

## **Session 2: Conflict Contexts and “Locals”**

### **Key Questions**

- **How does change in the context of a conflict affect an evaluation?**

It was widely acknowledged that changes in conflict context are a distinct possibility and will affect a project so evaluation should reflect this potential for change in its methodology. When discussing how evaluators could account for and respond to such change, it was agreed that the impact of change on the evaluation itself is uncertain but that change in context need not derail and evaluation unless it fails to adapt. It was suggested that evaluators should try and avoid the adoption of a ‘boxed-in’ mentality whereby the evaluation must be completed within a specified time frame no matter what the context. Some members of the group felt that lengthening the span of the evaluation might help with this problem.

- **What should the level of participants’ involvement be?**

The majority of the group expressed the opinion that a greater level of participant involvement is necessary. However, further consideration of when and to what extent such participant involvement should be incorporated is needed.

### **Key Issues**

- **Timing of the evaluation** (see also, [Impact, Session 3: Assessing the Impact of a Project](#))

It was noted that the timing of an evaluation in relation to the project, as well as its duration, greatly impact upon its process and outcome. Some felt that it was imperative for evaluators to bear in mind local customs and perspectives when considering a start date for evaluation.

- **Appropriate Research Methods**

It was suggested that greater pains to include locals in the evaluation process should be taken, in part to help avoid misunderstandings about the purpose of the evaluation. Many members agreed that locals should be involved in some way and that (as mentioned above) local customs and time frames must also be considered during the design of an evaluation. Research methods should also be culturally sensitive and appropriate.

- **Role of the evaluator** (see also [Impact, Session 1: Success & Failure & Impact, Session 2: Transfer](#))

It was suggested that while it is virtually impossible for an evaluator to be totally objective when dealing with local reality, steps must be taken to minimise bias. While acknowledging that bias is a problem, it was suggested that an evaluator’s adaptations of methodology might incorrectly be perceived as bias. It was also suggested that an evaluator must be chosen according to the goals of the evaluation as not all evaluators have the skills or experience to evaluate every type of project.

### **Related Issues**

- **Transferability of Evaluation Methods**

Members of the group expressed their concern that evaluations designed to assess fields other than conflict resolution (i.e. health or economic development programmes), are sometimes used to assess conflicts. Although drawing on other fields can be useful, the methodology from non-conflict evaluations is not inherently applicable or appropriate for evaluating conflicts.

- **Issue of Trust**

It was noted that there is often a ‘lack of trust’ between the stakeholders involved in an evaluation, and that this type of ‘parasitic relationship’ undoubtedly affects the evaluation. Many suggested that the inclusion of all stakeholders, especially participants, from the beginning to the end of the evaluation, would help alleviate this distrust and improve the accuracy of the evaluation itself.

### **Session 3: Evaluator to Revolutionary: Level of Involvement?**

#### **Key Issues**

- **Political Nature of Evaluations**

The so-called 'Neo-liberalisation of NGOs' in the field of PCR was discussed and it was noted that evaluations were becoming progressively more political, with an alarming number of political agendas disguised as PCR work. It was agreed that the field needs to address this issue and that evaluators need to be wary also. However, some members believed that practitioners are beginning to perceive some donor money as tainted and examples were given of NGOs refusing politically tied funds regardless of need.

- **Should evaluators be held accountable for the political manipulation of their work?**

It was noted that evaluations have on occasion been used *post facto* for political ends that the evaluator was entirely unaware of when carrying out the evaluation. Evaluators are then often held accountable for the political use of their evaluation, despite the fact that they were unaware that the evaluation had been instigated for political ends whilst they were carrying it out. It was not apparent how an evaluator can prepare for such a situation but most noted that evaluators should be aware of the potential for such manipulation.

- **Ethics**

A major component of an evaluation is to point out success or failure to the stakeholders (see also Impact, Session 1: Success & Failure). What is seen as 'failure' by stakeholders because of their respective political agendas or one-sided criteria may mean the withdrawal of funds for a project despite the evaluator's first-hand account of the project's many successes. This poses a difficult ethical dilemma for evaluators who have to be aware of this possibility.

- **To what extent should evaluators become involved at the local level?**

Many acknowledged the 'slippery slope' of an evaluator becoming too involved at the local level but what exactly was meant by 'too involved' was not easy to define. Many group members felt that evaluators could become involved as long as they did not breach ethical commitments to the stakeholders. All cautioned that their level of personal involvement is a matter for serious thought for any evaluator.

## **Theme III: UTILISATION OF EVALUATION**

### **Summary of Sessions 1-3**

- Session 1: Internal Use of Evaluation
- Session 2: External Use of Evaluation
- Session 3: Testing Theories of Change

#### **Session 1: Internal Use of Evaluation**

##### **Key Issues**

- **Information sharing**

The group emphasised the importance of using the information from evaluations to better their practice. A three-step process emerged from the discussion for sharing information: 1) meet with the evaluators to get their reflections and feedback; 2) share this information amongst practitioners; 3) follow-up by refining and adapting projects. It was suggested that this process should be promoted as 'learning' in the field as the term evaluation has many negative connotations for practitioners. Participants felt that learning can be gained both from what had worked and what had not.

However, it was also noted that this process could be constrained by limits on practitioners' time. The group felt that there needed to be a recognition that practitioners rarely have the time and space to reflect on their work. Many felt that funders should make resources available for organisational learning from evaluation.

- **Process versus Accountability**

It was noted that evaluations are often intended to be about how the project was delivered but ultimately end up being about accountability to the funders. Although the process results of an evaluation are most useful to the practitioner, the repeated emphasis on accountability has made many practitioners wary of evaluation. All participants agreed that it is critical for the evaluator to be explicit about the intended use of the evaluation throughout the entire process because in many cases evaluations are designed and conducted without an explicit understanding of who is going to see or use the evaluation.

Many group members also felt that evaluators are often held accountable for failing to provide non-existent evidence under unrealistic time frames. It was generally agreed that funders need to be more realistic as regards their expectations about evaluations, while evaluators need to be more realistic as to what it is possible to evaluate when designing the evaluation.

- **Reflective vs. proscriptive evaluation**

The danger of confusing reflective and proscriptive evaluations was discussed, with an emphasis on the different uses of each type. At a minimum, the group felt that evaluations should be reflective, yet there was much potential benefit in providing recommendation and suggestions for future action. However, members cautioned that often evaluators do not have the necessary skills and knowledge to proscribe new project directions. The traditional evaluator is trained primarily to collect data and to help stakeholders reflect on the work that has been completed.

## **Session 2: External Use of Evaluation**

### **Key Question**

- **What impact do evaluations have on policy?**

The extent to which evaluations impact on policy is major question with no definitive answer. The level of impact depends upon several factors, such as how the evaluation is funded, who conducts it, the criteria used and its intended purpose. Other factors mentioned included the level of agencies involved and the media attention garnered. Many agreed that although the direct impact of evaluation on policy (at both micro and macro levels) is unclear, evaluators must nevertheless consider potential for impact in their work.

### **Key Issues**

- **Use vs. Abuse of Evaluation**

One question that needs to be considered is for whom, and to what extent, the evaluation is going to be used as proof of success or failure (see also Impact, Session 1: Success & Failure). Many agreed that the potential for external misuse, or abuse, of an evaluation was high and evaluators must take this into consideration throughout the entire evaluation process. Some critical considerations emerged:

- i) Who is conducting the evaluation?
- ii) Who is commissioning it?
- iii) Who are the commissioners most likely to share the evaluation with?
- iv) Is the evaluation going to be made available to other agencies?

It was noted that this high profile sharing worked with the Rwanda evaluation but only because high-level agencies were involved and the stakeholders were aware of the intended level of sharing.

- **Confidentiality vs. Sharing** (see also Impact, Session 1: Success & Failure)

The issue of confidentiality and conflict resolution evaluation is an important one. There is a complex relationship between the concepts of confidentiality, utilisation and sharing. The fact that most evaluations are considered confidential in total or in part poses a dilemma as to how best to share and spread knowledge of what did or did not work. Sharing can positively affect impact; it can help alleviate overlap or gaps in project goals. However, most agreed that evaluators should try to be aware of the intended use and potential sharing of the evaluation throughout the entire process. Although practitioners can benefit from sharing, evaluators should be explicit with them about the intended level of that sharing.

- **Organisational Sharing of Evaluations**

Many members concurred that sharing is undoubtedly valuable in that it makes political, strategic and organisational bridge building possible. However, some questioned whether sharing always needs to be done through evaluations. Additionally, reluctance to share between organisations is apparent, probably driven by a fear of competition for territory and/or funds. Being explicit about the use of an evaluation may mitigate practitioners' fear that presenting what didn't work to evaluators will result in lost funding.

- **Funders can evaluate organisations, but why no reciprocity?**

The necessity of funders evaluating organisations is not in question but many inquired as to why organisations and practitioners had very few resources for evaluating funders.

### **Session 3: Assessing Theories of Change**

#### **Key Questions Raised**

- **To what extent should theories of change be made explicit in the evaluation process?**  
It was recognised that incorporating theories of change in the design and implementation of an evaluation can be useful. However, the extent to which they should be used and made explicit throughout the evaluation process was questioned.
- **Is it possible to ‘test’ the effectiveness of theories of change?**  
While theories are undoubtedly useful, is there any need to, or method for testing their effectiveness on the ground? Are theories of social change explicit enough to test in the field?

#### **Key Issues**

- **Theories to match Context** (See also Impact, Session 1: Success & Failure)  
It was suggested that the social theory applied to an evaluation should be dictated by both the context and the goals of the project. Many acknowledged the danger of trying to use the same pair of theoretical lenses for every evaluation. Theory and models are still useful but no one theory can cover all the dynamics of a conflict. Evaluators and funders must avoid the trap of believing that all conflicts can be moulded to fit one theory.
- **Validation**  
The fact that practitioners on the ground often question the usefulness of theories was recognised. Many members of the group suggested that there is a lack of connection between ‘action and analysis’ in social theory and that further examination is needed to validate that theories of change are effective at the practical level. It was also recognised that practitioners need confirmation that their project/efforts are beneficial regardless of the theory used.
- **Personal Models of Change**  
The group members took up the challenge of examining their own personal theories of change. It was felt that evaluators need, in a sense, to evaluate themselves in terms of their own views and theoretical lenses they believe in and use.

*End*