

# THINK TANK INITIATIVE LEARNING EVENT ON MONITORING & EVALUATION

Nairobi 8 – 11 March 2010

Some reflective notes

Wieteke Beernink

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## **Introduction**

From 8 – 11 March, the IDRC Think Tank Initiative organized its first learning event for all African partner organisations. The theme of the event was evaluative thinking, and monitoring & evaluation. I was invited to play a role as co-facilitator and resource person of the event. Furthermore I was asked to design through consultation with the event organization team, an evaluation process that engaged with perspectives of all participants, and facilitate this process before and during the event. The facilitation of a process of reflection with the Think Tank Initiative team was another aspect of my role, including the facilitation of an on-site debriefing meeting at the end of the session. Finally I was asked to share some reflections on the evaluation and the follow up.

## **Evaluation of the event**

### ***Process***

In the evaluation design we made a distinction between individual level, organisational level and the event itself.

*Individual level:* in the week prior to the event, and following an e-forum to which all participants were invited, we asked participants to formulate a personal question regarding M & E. During the event the participants shared and deepened their question in pairs every day. At the end they were asked to reframe their question and relate it to a specific action (which might even be to continue reflecting on questions!). They wrote this on a card which will be sent to them.

Although I did not have the opportunity to ask many of the participants about their experience and appreciation of working with a question, I could see a lively sharing in pairs. The people I spoke to mentioned they liked to work with a question, felt challenged to really explore it in a conscious way, noticed a shift in their question, and said the concept of a slow question was something new and appreciated. Due to time constraints we did not include a reflection on this methodology. As I suppose this way of reflection has been rather new, it might have been useful to dedicate time to reflection on reflection.

*Organisational level:* prior to the event we asked participants to organize a preparatory meeting to be held with at least two other colleagues of their organisation. We gave some guidelines for this meeting. The second day, participants formulated an action plan for M & E in their organization and indicated what support they would need immediately, in short term and longer term to realize this plan. Almost all took this activity very seriously. It was a helpful way for building the bridge between (first) evaluations and learnings and future actions. It is too early to say if and in what way the event has contributed to the development of an evaluative culture of the participating organisations. I will come back to this in my thoughts about the follow up.

Although the e-forum exchanges certainly assisted participants in identifying key needs of their organisation we did not gather information during the event to get to know how organisations prepared the learning event within their organisations, nor whether they used the provided guidelines for a preparatory meeting.

*The event itself.* The Think Tank Initiative team defined four evaluation topics: context, input, process and output (CIPO). The evaluation methodology we choose (four volunteers who could defined their approach) seemed to have been a very appropriate one. We got a lot of useful information on at least three of the topics (CIP) and the evaluation was carried out in a very participative way. I think the entire group of participants felt ownership of the results (I noticed there were hardly negative comments or disagreements after the presentation). Even when it comes to outcomes (which is the hardest issue to address during the event, as people are in the flow of the process, hearing new ideas, etc) some valuable things were mentioned. The daily sharing of the evaluation team of their observations was a good way of making a connection between the group and facilitators/resource persons. It helped the facilitators to reshape the program where needed. The great enthusiasm and enormous dedication of the evaluation team towards their task was very inspiring for the facilitators and resource persons team.

### ***Key messages from participants***

The evaluation team presented a comprehensive PowerPoint presentation, which captured a lot of findings. Therefore I only want to highlight some key messages.

- The event helped participants to get a more in-depth understanding on M & E (the event went beyond the normal, standard M&E stuff). It has certainly contributed to participants' understanding and consciousness of the importance of evaluative thinking for the improvement of research quality and the essential link between strategic planning and M & E.
- The content from external resource persons as well as the quality of their presentations has been highly appreciated. The resource persons had the right tone of voice and presented themes and issues in an accessible way. The differences in approaches, experiences and knowledge of the resource persons were valued (the small debates between Stephen Yeo and Sanjeev Sridharan during the "French session" were highly appreciated by the participants. It helped stimulate participants to become conscious of the need for independent thinking).
- Participants have seen clear links between various presentations – this strengthened and deepened a new understanding of M & E
- The program was too full, with too many plenary sessions. Group work and peer learning were highly appreciated but not enough time was allocated for these ways of learning and exchange. The value of more interactive sessions was confirmed after the final morning. The comments on too many plenaries came at end of Tuesday afternoon, and the evaluators commented in their final presentation on Wednesday that the "shift" towards groups/interactive work in the final session was both welcome, and helped to address the need they felt for more such sessions. In my opinion the extra day with the French group was not only important because of the language issue, but even more because it was a space for more in-depth exploring of various of the concept, ideas etc. I am afraid the lack of time for discussions, small group work etc. might have a negative impact on the real grounding of the learning. When planning future events – more open space in the programme is important.
- The Action plan was an important element.

- E-forum was highly appreciated – people arrived “prepared” and it contributed to a sense of ownership as well.
- It was already clear during the event that a number of participants would have liked to get to know more M & E tools. This was also expressed in the evaluation. It is important to stress that this was not a majority. I think most people were capable of understanding the real “messages” and content of the event. This will help them to find their way in finding, adapting, developing and choosing M & E tools for their own organisation.
- Little was said about the composition of the group. It seems that people felt happy with the mixture of participants. However it might be taken into consideration that some remarks were made about the lack of appropriateness of the event for administrators and finance officers. Perhaps this group may have felt the need for tools more strongly. I will come back to the issue of selection later.

In my opinion the evaluation findings can certainly be of great use in the design of future learning events, both in Africa as well as in other regions.

### ***Final session Think Tank Initiative team and resource persons***

At the real end of the event we came together as the Think Tank Initiative team and external resource persons .We had a good and thoughtful reflective meeting. Like the participants, all of us expressed our enthusiasm and appreciation for the event: good experiment, well positioned in the Think Tank Initiative, high level of engagement of most participants, good division of themes, inspiring evaluation team, good and sensitive way of facilitation. This event will for sure contribute to the ownership of partners for the Think Tank Initiative. Although the way space for reflection and learning was incorporated in the program was valued, a concern about the lack of space for peer learning, dialogue and exploration of new learnings was shared as well. The importance of a good support in the follow up was clearly mentioned.

We reflected on other issues as well, but most are beyond the scope of these reflective notes.

### ***And how about the learning during the event?***

Given the objectives of the event, the pioneer phase of the Think Tank Initiative, the evaluation outcomes of participants and ourselves (Think Tank Initiative and external resource persons) we can say the event was quite a successful experiment. All involved learned a lot and shared commitment. The event for sure has generated a lot of energy and inspiration for the further development of the participating organisations as well as the Think Tank Initiative as a whole.

However it is important to see in what way “learning” was approached during the event. I think the focus of the learning was on M&E content and substance and the main focus of the learning methodology was on presentations. Both the content as well as the presentations was very important and highly valued and appreciated by participants. It not only suited their needs for new concepts and deepening their knowledge, but most probably their preferred learning style as well. Given the nature of their work as THINK tanks, I expect the majority of the participants has a preference for learning by abstract conceptualization and has an assimilating learning style.

However, for more grounding of the learning more space for individual and collective exploration, learning, exchange, debates etc. would have been useful.

Furthermore in my opinion it is important to dedicate in learning events more time and space for reflection and learning on learning itself. This is even more the case in an event on monitoring and evaluation as learning and M&E are or should be closely connected. In my point of view, only if an individual / organisation is conscious about its own learning, he/it becomes able to be accountable AND improve or change its policy and actions. Conscious learning requires continuous observation of actions, processes and actors, as well as of the connections between these. Monitoring and evaluation is about continuous observation and collection of 'data' that will enable us to reflect, learn, plan and shape our future actions in a holistic way. Monitoring and evaluation need to support individual and organisational learning and vice versa. Both evaluation and learning are processes of social construction of knowledge in order to contribute to development and change.

### **Follow up learning support**

As I mentioned I have some concerns about the grounding of the learnings in the event. Fortunately grounding can especially happen in practice! There are various ways of supporting the grounding.

- We mentioned participants would receive a small questionnaire on the event. Although our initial thoughts were that this would be to evaluate the event, I think the focus should now be on making the link between the event and the action plan of the organisation (especially actions with regard to M&E, evaluative thinking, building the action learning cycle in the organisation). I think it is important to send this as soon as possible. It might help participants to keep the learning alive and link learnings to their practice. It will also help to see what they got out of the event, where they are now, and what kind of support they need.
- The Program Officers can certainly play a supportive role. I don't know how they are perceived by the organisations. Are they seen primarily as the ones who do the monitoring of the progress towards achieving stated goals and objectives of each Think Tank Initiative partner? Or are they seen as a real partner who can provide mentoring and support and are open for learning themselves as well? Probably it is both - in some way a mixture of these two? It may depend of the majority of the partner organisation whether it can see and be open for both roles. From my outsider perspective it is not easy to give concrete suggestions for ways of support. But I could share some initial ideas. I think it is important that Programme Officers maintain close contact with the organisations for which they have a programme responsibility, either by mail or Skype, show a sincere interest and try to raise questions which challenge reflection and stimulate action. Question topics might be:
  - Ideas of the organisation on its own capacity building: how do they make an organisational self assessment? Which organisational processes do they include in their assessment; all principal organisational processes (thinking and learning, doing, being and relating) or only one or two?
  - How do they use their core funding: have they been thinking of making a strategic plan? How are they going to do it? How do they build in learning in their work? Etc.
  - I have noticed there is already a close cooperation between HQ and the Programme Officers at the level of project management. Perhaps it might be a challenge to increase the cooperation around some substantive areas like support to learning and capacity development.

- E forum. It seems to me that it is very important to keep the e forum alive. I suggest placing something on it at least once a week. A small article, a provocative statement, a question, suggestions for creative writing, for tools, etc. You might involve the resource persons in this. You could also ask every week an organisation to write his experience, a specific “burning” issue etc. Start asking one organisation and this organisation may give the floor to someone else, etc. Key message: keep it alive!
- I don't have a copy of the action plans, but I remember peer learning was mentioned various times. An initiative on this can be started Ask some volunteers, give support to this (either from within the Initiative team or from some of the resource persons, including myself).

### **Future learnings:**

During the event four groups explored future learning needs on policy research communication, leadership and HRM, cross organisational M & E, resource mobilisation. These ideas were captured by the leaders and shared with Think Tank Initiative. I am impressed by the number of very challenging and already concrete ideas, both regarding content as well as approach. And I felt a great sense of ownership. Try to facilitate and accommodate the ownership as much as possible (and stimulate contribution of organisations by their core funding as well!).

When it comes to approaches, different groups mentioned peer learning and exchanges, trainings (for executives), e-forum, best practices. I think Think Tank Initiative support to the development of the different learning approaches as well as to choosing the right learning approach / methodology could be valuable.

Regarding the content: the group which elaborated the leadership and HRM ideas has covered a wide range of topics. Some maybe of real importance and interests for leaders only, some for HR staff as well. Make sure that the leaders receive the support, guidance, coaching which they deserve. The group mentioned the isolated position of leaders. Give due attention to them within Think Tank Initiative because they are the pillar in their think tanks! In my experience real leadership learning programs consist of various elements – including peer learning groups as well as individual coaching.

It might be taken into consideration to develop a kind of learning platform or learning core group which could develop and guide future collective Think Tank Initiative learning initiatives and approaches. This group could be composed by participating organisations and Think Tank Initiative (HQ) staff. The group could also have a role in designing the monitoring and evaluation of the collective learning in the Think Tank Initiative.

A final issue to take into consideration for future learning events is the selection of participants. A clear description of objectives and target group are obviously needed but not enough. Perhaps programme officers could engage with the directors and assist them in the selection of the most appropriate person(s) to participate in the event.

**External resource persons – future role**

At the briefing in Nairobi just before the event, it was mentioned that a desirable situation would be for at least some of the resource persons to continue their collaboration with the Initiative, particularly in relation to this topic of M&E. Amongst the 6 external persons in Nairobi there seemed to have emerged the potential of a small core group of four persons (SS, SY, EM and WB) which could continue after this event. I would suggest involving this group already in the design phase of the monitoring and evaluation events in South Asia and Latin America.

Given the diverse experiences in monitoring, evaluation and learning of this group it might be a suggestion to give this group also a role in the (design) of the evaluation of the Think Tank Initiative. In my opinion externals who have an involvement and role in a process or initiative can have an added value in an evaluation.

**To end**

I have highly appreciated to be part of this developmental journey and I would like to express my gratefulness for having been invited to contribute. The Think Tank Initiative is a very innovative initiative with great potential. The high level of thinking as well as commitment and energy of most of the participating organisations are very promising. I wish all Think Tank Initiative staff a lot of creativity, courage and inspiration in “walking the walk”. I hope you will all create space to slow down from time to time to reflect and to learn and to appreciate the pleasure of the journey!

Driebergen, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2010