

AN ORIGINAL EXPERIMENTAL COLLECTIVE APPROACH TO THE CONTINUUM EVALUATION-CAPITALISATION-DISSEMINATION

THE GROUP URD WORK ON POST-MITCH EMERGENCY AND REHABILITATION PROGRAMMES IN NICARAGUA AND HONDURAS.

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ORIGIN OF THE WORK

The Group URD, based in the South of France, is an inter-agency structure composed by one third of "emergency NGO", one third "developmental NGO" and one third academics. Its activities are organised around a series of concentric circles with research and evaluation being the inner circle, debate and publication being the second one and training and teaching constituting the third and external circle. The philosophy of this set up is that, in order to improve humanitarian practices, the following series of steps is necessary : a) generation of knowledge (research and evaluation) followed by b) "capitalisation" (accumulation of this knowledge) and c) "valorisation" through diffusion in the form of books, publications and training sessions.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster created by Hurricane Mitch, the Group URD started to receive news and questions from its members in the field. Their queries were very much related to the main research themes of the Group : tools for diagnosis, food security, partnerships in turbulence, from free gift to cost recovery schemes, co-ordination of the micro, macro and meso levels of interventions including the relations between state and private humanitarian assistances, etc. This immediately led the Group URD to propose and integrated approach to co-ordination mechanism, field evaluation and collective learning process.

THE INITIATION OF THE PROGRAMME

The initial objective was "evaluation, capitalisation and collective learning". When this proposal came on the table, the first reaction was often cautiously positive : the typical reluctance of NGO faced by "the challenges and risks of evaluation" could be perceived beneath the superficial words of interest.

But the Group URD did not propose the project in a normal set-up. Indeed, during the course of 1998, URD was in charge of a working group composed by representatives of NGO and government bodies, preparing for the reform of the state international aid system. This peculiar entity, called "Commission Cooperation Developpement" (CCD) assisted the Group to move its proposal on Mitch from an purely NGO evaluative approach to an inter NGO-Government framework. The Mitch Task Force was born.

During the weeks after Mitch, fund raising and redistribution to the NGO was in France co-ordinated and centralised by a private foundation : the *Fondation de France* or FDF. Interesting and not anodyne, this main donor to the French NGO received very positively the funding request from Group URD and became one of the leading actor of the Task Force. They got involved, not only for the sake of ensuring accountability towards their hundreds of thousands of individual donors, but also for the purpose of helping the NGO to improve their practices. However, and it will be seen latter, the involvement of the main funding agency in the whole operation had some side effects which had to be dealt with during the mission.

THE WORK OF THE TASK FORCE

In order to ensure both the transparency of the approach and the ownership of it by the Head Quarters of the concerned NGO, networking in France became a operational priority for the preparation of the

field mission. A desk person with good field experience was recruited for that purpose. The evaluation proposal of Group URD was widely circulated.. Regular task-Force meetings took place in Paris.

Divers events and initiatives have both delayed the field mission and enriched the overall preparation. The main governmental donors (bilateral and multilateral) were due to meet in Stockholm in April, with the NGO convening their own NGO forum simultaneously in the Swedish Capital city. The NGO prepared a rather elaborated position paper which was proposed to Task Force in order to have a common position. The governmental actors jumped in the boat : the speech delivered by the French Ministry for international aid was largely influenced by it. The Stockholm process and the NGO/Government collaborative efforts created an interesting precedent in France with the post-Mitch evaluation project offering an unexpected interesting framework.

THE PERIOD PRIOR TO THE MISSION

Interesting enough, the stated terms of references (TOR) of the mission did not result into large debates between the Group URD, the concerned NGO, the government bodies involved in the Task-Force and the FDF. However, a certain "*flou artistique*" remained between what was the main goal of the mission as elaborated by URD, and the perception of the donor. Indeed, while URD was much more interested in transversal issues such as quality of the diagnosis, relevance of the action, partnerships, sustainability, prevention of future vulnerability, FDF was more looking for information on the way the funds were spend, on how coherent were the realisations in the view of the project documents submitted to them by the NGO. But this was not *per se* included into the accepted TOR of the mission. However, since the Head of the International Department of FDF was very involved in the operation and visited the area a couple of time, he was also very sensitive to only the issue of the realisation of stated objectives but to the more important question of the relevance of the programmes. A non fully clarified scope of work still remained however, and it will be seen later on its repercussion for the post mission phase.

From the very beginning, the idea was to have a strong multidisciplinary team. Indeed, issues to be looked at were covering a wide spectrum of sectors and inter sectorial areas : re-establishing the time framework of the various operations and of the involvement of the many actors (national, international, military, civilian, etc.); shelter (not only the design and implementation of building schemes, but also the social engineering behind the creation of new human settlements), food security (from food aid to agricultural rehabilitation and urban income generating activities), health (from emergency rescue to public health, including establishment of cost recovery schemes in the health sector) and co-ordination between the various actors involved. By chance, an important part of these human resources was already available within URD itself. This was crucial since it ensured a very good cohesion within the evaluation team itself. At the end, the team consisted in a agriculture/food security/resettlement specialist who serve as well as team leader, a medical doctor and public health specialist, a lawyer for the land right issues (so important in Central America) and two emergency specialists, one looking more into the relation between civil and military actors, including through the "disaster management cycle" perspective, and the other, who was the manager of the Mitch Task Force, who was in charge of the various facets of the inter-actor co-ordination issue.

Regular team meetings took place, either in Paris or in the training centre of the Group URD located South of France. Probably not enough. Indeed the more interaction between team members , the better is the cohesiveness of the team. The distance between Paris, where most of the activities of the Task Force took place, and the actual location of URD was both a intellectual chance (URD could keep its position of a distanciated observer, not involved in neither the operations nor the inter-agency fights) and a logistical nightmare.

At one stage, after having witnessed a emotional presentation of an evaluation mission based on a slide show, it was decided to add visual material for a more creative post mission feed-back. A photograph well known for his job on Rwanda and Albania, Philippe Merchez, was very interested in the challenge and join the team for the whole mission.

Networking with both the European and Central American levels became soon indispensable. The first one was to ensure that the initiative of the group URD could get co-ordinated with other similar ones and enriched by the findings of those who would be carried out earlier. Massive quantities of

information was collected. This became particularly crucial for the operational preparation of the mission. But the establishment of relations with the Central American network was a corner stone to the whole *démarche*. Not only was this consistent with the methodology- of the Group (partnerships with local capacities), but it turned out to be another essential ingredient of the success of the whole operation. Establishing confidence with the national actors from the NGO sector was indeed seen as essential.

Review of documentation was an important part of this pre-mission phase : Most of the project documents were analysed. Through the activities of the Mitch task Force and the involvement in European and international networks (including ALNALP) and a regular review of the resources available through the NET the mission team had access to more information than it could really digest.

THE MISSION

After a few delays the mission finally reached Managua in August. This was the end of the disbursement period and implementation of most of the projects but in the same time, most of the international actors were still there (despite the already perceivable Albania/Kosovo drain). The field work was organised in two phases : an first two week tour of the whole area, with the team functioning as a unit, even if regular split in sub-teams was necessary. Thus every body in the team had a global and shared view of the area and of the problems.

In such wide evaluation, it is essential to maintain a high level of team work while preserving individual sector responsibilities. This was achieved by a clear allocation of area of responsibility, and, in the main time, establishing a mechanism for the sharing of views, the elucidation of discomfort, and a common approach views. Keeping a team spirit is indeed fundamental, especially when the quantity of work is huge, the living conditions and transportation means sometimes precarious and the climatic conditions hazardous.

In view of the risk of losing the involvement and the views of the many local actors, networking again and again was a "key word". National authorities, local authorities, local trade union, farmer associations, women associations, national NGO and their federations were encountered time and again. UN agencies, embassies, representatives of the European Union, international NGO (not only the French ones funded by the FDF, but also other nationalities) were also meet and their views discussed and included as raw material into the "evaluative brain storming".

There was a fear within the evaluation team that wrong wave length could have been sent by the donor. Indeed, they were and many people were expecting more of an auditing and classical evaluation than a emphatic and transversal approach. In order to diffuse any wrong feeling, a strategy was put in place. When entering in or leaving a country, the team organised and introduction meeting and, at the end, a feeding back meeting. This was quite efficient for ensuring a minimum of confidence from the "evaluatees" and buying them in the evaluation process. A special effort was made towards the national NGO. For instance in Nicaragua, URD co-organised with the *Coordinadora Civile* a series of three mini workshops to feed back its constituency : one on the global issue of reconstruction, one on health and one on agriculture and food security. These happenings offered excellent opportunities to get the views of the local actors on the findings of the Group URD team.

AFTER THE MISSION

Initial feed back to the Task Force (NGO stake holders and government bodies) took place in two times : one when the mission was just back, and one after the first review of the findings. This proved an important component in the overall ownership of the results of the evaluation. First reactions were in some cases quite strong, and this in two directions : "lets do it again", showing the interest of certain actors in this kind of process. "Are you sure you really visited our project ?" from those for which the report was most critical. The URD answer was to both : "wait for the draft report were you will see was we just said but in a more substantiated manner".

The drafting of the report was a relatively process, despite the fact that the team had been partly dismantled. Only partly, because most of them were involved in URD in a much broader manner. But

the fact remains (and its probably well known by all evaluation team managers) that when a team is back, every body gets catch up by all the pending issues...The new technology and INTERNET in particular nevertheless have made life much easier and each member was able to complete by and large its part on time for the dissemination of the first draft ... with only one week delay from the announced schedule.

The typical "Loch Ness Monster" of any evaluation reappeared here : the unclear, non clarified and hidden agenda behind the evaluation. Indeed, the FDF was not totally satisfied with the report. Indeed, the classical auditing approach that any donor is expecting from an evaluation was missing. Not that the issues of coherence, effectiveness, efficiency were not treated. But they were given much less importance than the questions of relevance, sustainability, co-ordination, vulnerability reduction, partnership, etc. In addition, instead of analysing and presenting the result of the evaluation NGO by NGO and project by project, they were presented transversally and by sector : individual NGO work or situation was then used more to illustrate the main discourse rather than a judgement toward that particular NGO or project.

The photo display process was a success. The photograph managed extremely well to recreate the atmosphere of the visited area and to illustrate the challenges faced by the region 8 months after the Hurricane. Despite a delay due to unforeseen events (additional workshops in Brussels and France, visit of the new EU commissioner in charge of ECHO and DG 8 in Paris, etc.), it could take place and was received with a lot of praises.

The technical workshops were aimed at discussing in details the results of the mission. With the first venue being cancelled due to the same reasons as for the photo display, reconvening them was difficult. Most people had switched in their mind on Timor, Kosovo, Venezuela, etc. However, as small and very technical happenings, they provided a useful framework to discuss the mission findings

The road from the initial draft report to the final product was a lengthy and sometimes frustrating process. While waiting from the feed back on the first draft, the various team members went back to their own scope of work. To go back to the report in order to incorporate the views expressed either during the technical workshops or sent by e.mail felt back on the shoulder of the team leader.

CONCLUSION

The lessons learned from the mission were many fold : A crucial issue is the way which will ensure that the whole team was progressing simultaneously and in a coherent manner. Regular team meeting, collective analysis of the status of the information gathered and of the state of the art of the through is essential. Another key point is the way the evaluation team creates a climate conducive to the confidence that would facilitate exchange of views and transparency in the sharing of information. For the Group URD team, this went along side with first a prior notice, and second with a good supply of French Pastis and vines to be offered as a friendly gesture to the receiving field staff of the various NGO. Culture sensitivity has to apply not only toward the natives, but also for internal consumption within the aid side.

May be more interesting were the lessons learned from and during the process. First and foremost, the need to ensure clarity of the TOR and a shared understanding of them by all stakeholders (donors, field agencies and the evaluation team) is paramount to the success of the evaluation process.

Costs involved for the whole process (task-force management, mission preparation, mission realisation and mission's results exploitation) were not very high. The magnitude of the cost spread along a 12 month period, amounts to roughly 100.000 US\$. It should be said that a lot of voluntary work has been involved, which makes the operation at such low cost not necessarily reproducible.