# PROGRAM AND PROJECT EVALUATIONS

Frederick C. Cuny
INTERTECT

## The Need to Evaluate

Each year, hundreds of relief programs are initiated around the world. With few exceptions, most of these programs are carried out by people who have had no previous experience in disaster situations. They begin with certain basic assumptions about the way in which post-disaster programs should be operated. As they progress, problems are encountered and overcome, and new approaches evolve. After a long process of trial and error, a program is welded together and carried out. Almost all of these programs have one thing in common: they are repeating mistakes which have been made countless times before, and they are not taking advantage of lessons learned in previous disasters. The reason for this is simple: useful data on the performance of post-disaster programs is missing.

Intervenors may prepare detailed post-disaster reports listing the assistance which they have provided during their involvement; however, true analysis is rare. Few reports state what the initial objectives of a program were and how the program lived up to these objectives. Performance data about programs is sketchy, and virtually none of the reports examine the impact of activities on the victim population. There is a dearth of hard data on program philosophy -- why a program was set up in a particular manner, and what the associated objectives were. This lack of detailed information means that, each time a disaster strikes, someone has to begin from scratch to relearn all the lessons that have been learned before.

There are several reasons why this information is not available. First, most agencies do not plan in advance for evaluation, or they may cut evaluation monies in an attempt to cut the overhead costs of administering a program. Second, there is usually a high turnover of foreign field staff. The people who are usually in charge of carrying out the programs are often retained for only a short period of time, and it is almost never a part of their contract to write a detailed report on what they did, what worked, and what did not. Because many of these people are not full-time relief specialists, they may not feel qualified to do an analysis of their activities. Many field workers like to point out that they are not "paper shufflers", that they "get on with the action", and they are disdainful of and will avoid any type of report preparation.

Another factor is the common belief that someone else is probably doing the evaluation. Many temporary field staff believe that the field director or other persons in charge of the program will be conducting an evaluation, and therefore they do not feel that reporting or documentation is necessary.

Some agencies say that they do not know <u>what</u> to evaluate, nor <u>how</u> to evaluate a program. And many agencies are reluctant to devote much time to analyzing their activities, particularly if the program has received any criticism.

In order to improve the relief system, it is necessary to document and analyze actions at all levels of the system. Evaluations should be carried out during and after the program. Information coming in throughout the program should be checked to determine performance against objectives. Until this information is available, much of the money spent on relief and reconstruction programs will have only limited effectiveness.

## What Type of Evaluation Should be Carried Out?

There are two general methods for carrying out an evaluation. The first is to hire someone from outside to come in and conduct a study. The second is to carry out a self-evaluation. While there are advantages and disadvantages to both, INTERTECT has come to strongly believe in self-evaluation. Among the key advantages to this approach are:

1. The people who are most familiar with all the things that have happened in a program are those who actually carried it out. Thus they are well-qualified to analyze the program, to examine the cause-and-effect relationships, and to evaluate its impact. If an outsider is brought in to conduct the evaluation, he must first be educated as to what the program was all about, and then he must be relied upon to provide an evaluation which will be meaningful. In the end, in order to familiarize the evaluator with the program, many of the same things will have to be done as would be required in a self-evaluation.

2. By doing the evaluation yourself, you learn the lessons. They will be much clearer to you than if someone else had done the evaluation.

3. A self-evaluation can be carried out in part through internal processes, and thus will be less costly. For example, during normal staff meetings or meetings with neighborhood groups, certain procedures can be instigated which will enable you to gather much of the information that you need. Furthermore, an exercise carried out in this manner will show the people that you are concerned with getting their input and participation. Hence, an important spin-off effect should be gained in the enhancement of your activities in the project areas in the future.

4. By keeping the exercise in-house, people should be more open and less defensive; thus the quality of the information received and analyzed should be much higher.

5. By going through the process yourself, you develop the skills. By having the community leaders participate in the process with you, you help develop their skills and leave those in the community. One of the most vital skills to be nurtured in a community development program is the ability of the local people to continuously evaluate what they are doing.

6. By conducting an in-house evaluation, more people will be reached than an outsider will be able to contact. Furthermore, you will be able to pick up on details which an outsider might overlook as not necessarily being important. This again should improve the quality of the information, as well as the quantity.

7. A key factor in conducting an in-house self-evaluation is the fact that you will not be introducing any more strangers to the people with whom you work, who often are irritated

by having to meet new people constantly and answer questions from strangers. By the time of an evaluation, you should have built up a good working relationship with the vast majority of the people in the project area, where you are well known and your motives are not suspect (at least not as much as those of an outsider). Both the quality and the quantity of the information you receive should be greater than if collected by a stranger.

The advantages to having an outsider conduct an evaluation must be judged on the basis of what works for you. In other words, it may suit your needs as overworked staff personnel; but will it really serve the need of getting the kind of information you require? Among the advantages of this approach are:

1. It should (theoretically) prevent excessive additional workloads from being placed on the staff.

2. The evaluation may (theoretically) be faster.

3. An outside evaluator can provide fresh viewpoints and insights into your operations.

4. An outside evaluator may be able to provide comments in his final report that staff members may be reluctant to verbalize.

5. Under some circumstances, information as to recipients' attitudes may be more accurate when given to an outsider rather than to someone who has been active in a program.

(These last two comments may be overrated. If structured properly, a self-evaluation should be just as accurate as one conducted by an outsider.)

This is not to say that there is no role for outside consultants. A local consultant can be used to gather statistics or quantifiable information that is needed for the evaluation. Furthermore, a management consultant with experience in evaluations can be brought in at various key points to serve as a facilitator, to help synthesize ideas and to advise on ways of achieving the broader objectives of the exercise. A self-evaluation which uses an outside facilitator is called an "aided" self-evaluation and combines the primary advantages of both the above-described approaches.

## What Procedures Should be Followed to Carry Out an Aided Self-Evaluation?

There are three steps that should be taken in order to carry out a successful aided self-evaluation. First, establish exactly what you want to find out in the evaluation; i.e., establish the goals. Second, establish the criteria by which you will evaluate the program's performance. Finally, decide how the results of the exercise can be made functional; in other words, how can you ensure that the lessons learned will get to the people who will need these the next time around?

To examine these steps more closely, the most useful things that can come out of an evaluation must be determined first. Recent experience in self-evaluations has shown that among the most useful things are:

1. Identification of issues: In many ways, this is the most valuable product of any evaluation. The term "issues" refers to the broader questions that program personnel are forced to confront throughout the conduct of a program. For example, one issue which always arises in housing programs is whether a house should be given away free; whether the cost should be subsidized; or whether people should pay the full price. By identifying issues which arose during the course of a program and examining how the program responded to these issues, it is possible to pull out policy lessons which will help to frame future programs.

2. What policy lessons have been learned?: Specifically, if you were to do it again, what policies could be set in advance that would provide a better framework in which to operate? Also, what policies did you have that were restrictive to your operations, or simply were not appropriate to the situation?

3. What pressures were exerted on the program and on the personnel? Where were these pressures generated? Were they internal (within the organization) or external (outside the organization)?

4. How did the structure of the organization affect decision-making? What organizational models were used, and how did they facilitate or inhibit information from reaching those who should have had it?

5. What are the linkages? Vertical linkages are those which exist within an organization (e.g. from agency headquarters to field director is the first level of vertical linkages; the next level is from the field director to the local organization; and the next linkage is from the local organization to the local committee). Horizontal linkages are those which occur between organizations (for instance between the program and the local government).

   Plot the various linkages and try to describe them in terms of where the most interaction was located. At the same time, try to determine where the majority of the problems occurred. Which way did information flow within the linkages -- horizontally, vertically, or in all directions? What linkages existed between various components of the program, to outside sources of information, etc.? Development of this exercise will be most important in determining how the program functions.

   If the problem areas are examined in relation to the organization chart and to the linkages chart that is developed, this should give a good idea of the type of organizational problems you should expect to encounter next time a disaster occurs. And it will provide an excellent guide to the placing of emphasis in terms of organizing the next program.

6. Analyze the sequence of events which occurred, and try to determine whether this sequence was the best that could have taken place. How can short-cuts be developed? If short-cuts were taken, how did they work out in the end?

7. Did the program which was selected represent the best possible use of the resources available? This is always a difficult question, especially when examined against needs in many other areas (not only within the disaster-affected area, but also certainly within other areas where the agency is active). In order to determine this, you must look at the overall impact of the project, its effects on the people, and the problems it may alleviate or cause in the future.

8. What effect did the program have on the coping mechanisms of the community? Every society or community has its own "built-in" approaches to coping with everyday life as well as with disastrous circumstances. Examples of coping mechanisms include the church, the family and the extended family, the patron system, etc. What effect did the program have on these internal mechanisms? Did it help to make them more viable, or did it damage them in any way? Were any new coping mechanisms developed as a result of the program? Were any dependency relationships created?

9. What effect did the program have on local processes, both the formal and the informal ways in which things get done in a society? What effect did it have on the ways in which people interact, on the ways in which various sectors of the community participate? Was the overall effect positive or negative?

10. What future problems may the program have caused? Specifically, try to determine the social and environmental impact. However, this should be balanced with the problems that the program has alleviated. In fact, as an exercise, a chart should be developed to try to balance the problems created with the problems alleviated. Then an overall statement of performance should be developed from this exercise.

Next, examine the criteria by which the program will be evaluated. One of the major problems in program evaluation is the inadequacy of the criteria used for the evaluation. Organizations tend to examine programs in terms of their own needs rather than those of the victims whom they intend to assist. Evaluations based on these criteria can serve only to provide information that is misleading and unable to get at the root of the problems. A bottom-up approach is necessary for a critical examination of the impact of programs on a particular society.

Two questions must be asked: 1) whose needs does this activity meet? and 2) where does the accountability for action lie? While designed to help the victims, the majority of programs which are currently carried out more accurately reflect the needs of the donors than the recipients. One only needs to examine the criteria normally used in developing emergency shelters to verify this

statement. For example, is the shelter unit which is compact, easily transportable, quickly erected and produced in an industrial nation truly meeting the needs of the victims and the society? Or rather does it represent criteria developed by and for the relief agency? In every stage of post-disaster response, we must ask the question: whose needs does this activity meet?

What we are talking about is accountability, a concept which needs to be explored in an evaluation. While many relief organizations consider themselves to be accountable to the society and the country in which they operate, in fact, few mechanisms exist to ensure that they actually meet the needs of the disaster victims. Experience has shown that, the more an organization is strictly relief oriented, the less accountable it becomes. The evaluation should explore whether or not mechanisms have been developed which place accountability at the community level. Such mechanisms might include participatory management and decision-making, legal controls, etc. There is, of course, dual accountability; agencies are in fact accountable to their accountants and their donors as well as to the victims. But ultimate accountability -- the final test for evaluation of a program -- should be to meet the needs of the victim population.

Once the outlines for conducting and evaluating the program have been made, methods for making the results of the evaluation functional must be developed. Of course, some sort of written document should be prepared by the participants as a record of what was learned in the evaluation. But what other types of activities besides report-writing can be carried out to make the experience functional and to provide useful information for others? There are no easy answers to this question. Some organizations have addressed this problem in the following ways:

1. In one case, personnel from the agency (especially those at the executive level) who were not actual participants in the program were invited to attend the self-evaluation exercise as observers.

2. In another case, personnel organized the evaluation as the first step of a training program for other field personnel of the agency working in other areas. (Note that this was viewed as a first step rather than as an end-product.)

3. The disaster officer of one organization attended an evaluation exercise, recorded the lessons learned and the issues which emerged, and used these as a basis to formulate disaster preparedness guidelines for his agency; then a training program was built around them.

Other possibilities abound. With proper forethought, each agency can develop mechanisms which will make the information a functional tool.

## What is the Role of a Consultant in Aided Self-Evaluations?

The concept of self-evaluation rests on two basic ideas. The first is that in something as complex as disaster management, there are no experts; everyone has something to learn and something to offer. The second is that if organizations are to learn how to make the best, most effective decisions, then they must learn from the people whom they are trying to assist and from the experiences of their own field-level workers who have seen for themselves the successes and the problems of the program.

In discussions of problems and issues, many people get bogged down with the complexities and often "fail to see the forest for the trees". There are patterns which evolve in every disaster and many problems re-occur. Even in terms of simple program management, there are recurring problem points. The role of the outside consultant is to serve as a facilitator, helping participants in the evaluation to cut through the non-essential parts of the program and to focus on the key problem areas, pointing out those with which other programs and agencies have had similar experiences. The consultant does not control the evaluation; as a facilitator, he often plays the part of a "devil's advocate", asking questions which need to be addressed and which otherwise might be overlooked.

In addition, a consultant can offer advice on ways of making the results of the exercise functional. In some exercises, a consultant may also take on the role of developing formats for different sessions or parts of the evaluation. Another function of the consultant may be to edit the participants' report at the end of the self-evaluation.

## What are the Criteria for Selecting an Effective Consultant?

Of course, the criteria will change from situation to situation; but in general there are five main considerations:

1. Is the consultant experienced, especially in the type of evaluation that will be carried out? In short, check his references.

2. Does the consultant have experience in carrying out or administering a relief or development program? In other words, is he familiar with the issues?

3. Is the consultant familiar with the area? Does he have an understanding of the society/culture in which the program has been operating?

4. Is the consultant familiar with the organization(s) involved in the self-evaluation?

5. Does the consultant speak the language in which the evaluation will be conducted?

Another very important consideration may be whether the consultant is from the program area. Self-evaluations not only can develop skills and improve performance for those participating in the evaluation; they also can often be an exercise which leaves improved evaluation skills within the local community. This is not to say that the evaluation should be carried out for the benefit of the evaluator. But if the choice comes down to two people who are equally qualified, one of whom is from the area, then the assignment should always go to the local person.

Summary

As pointed out before, the primary obstacle to the improvement of relief performance is the lack of good, functional information about what has been done before. Only by addressing this problem head-on -- facing up to the need to evaluate each action, every program and project carried out, and the need to document the lessons learned -- will relief agencies be able to improve their performance and truly help those who are the victims of disasters.

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