



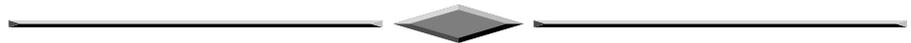
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DAC WORKING PARTY ON AID EVALUATION

**SUMMARY REPORT OF THE TOKYO
WORKSHOP:
EVALUATION FEEDBACK FOR
EFFECTIVE LEARNING AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

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Agenda item 6



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Contents

1.	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
2.	INTRODUCTION	5
3.	THE CHANGING AID LANDSCAPE	6
4.	THE FEEDBACK CHALLENGE	7
	<i>Learning and accountability</i>	7
	<i>The learning frontier</i>	7
	<i>Obstacles to learning</i>	8
	<i>Addressing the demand side</i>	9
5.	UNDERSTANDING TARGET AUDIENCES	9
	<i>Better targeting</i>	9
	<i>Parliament, Ministers and Boards</i>	11
	<i>The Media</i>	11
	<i>NGOs and CSOs</i>	12
	<i>The General Public</i>	12
	<i>The case for disclosure</i>	13
6.	GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS	13
	<i>Learning by doing</i>	13
	<i>Relevance</i>	14
	<i>Timeliness</i>	14
	<i>Quality issues</i>	15
	<i>Language barriers</i>	15
	<i>Intelligent use of the Internet</i>	16
	<i>Interagency lesson learning</i>	16
	<i>The value of face-to-face communication</i>	17
7.	INVOLVING PARTNERS	17
8.	INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES	19
	<i>The status of evaluation units</i>	19
	<i>Institutionalising lesson learning</i>	20
	<i>Results Based Management</i>	21
	<i>Staffing and resourcing</i>	21

ANNEX 1: WORKSHOP PROGRAMME: to be made available at 33rd meeting of WP

ANNEX 2: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS: to be made available at 33rd meeting of WP

1. Executive Summary

1. There was a keen recognition among all the agencies present at the Workshop of the need to improve their evaluation feedback practices. However the differences between agencies in their background, structure and priorities means that this is not an area where a blueprint approach is appropriate.
2. Several important challenges were laid down at the Workshop, in particular the need for much fuller involvement of developing country partners in the evaluation and learning process, and the importance of identifying target audiences more carefully and becoming more demand led, rather than supply driven.
3. There were differences of opinion on the relationship between learning and accountability, and the pros and cons of evaluation units guarding their independent role. Some agencies argued that the accountability that comes from full independence is an essential foundation for learning. Others were of the view that too much emphasis on independence can be counterproductive if it gets in the way of the partnerships needed to facilitate learning.
4. There was agreement, however, that this is not an either/or situation. Both accountability and learning are important goals for evaluation feedback. Of the two, learning is the area where agencies recognise the greatest challenges.
5. There are many obstacles to learning relating to organisational culture, lack of incentives to learn, unequal aid relationships and other factors. These need to be identified and specifically targeted if progress is to be made.
6. Discussion of different stakeholder groups emphasised the need to tailor feedback approaches to suit different target audiences. This is a clear case where one size does not fit all.
7. Despite the risks involved, the case for full disclosure of evaluation reports was widely accepted. Relations with parliaments and the media, for example, hinge on trust. This requires an atmosphere of openness and a willingness to discuss problems as well as success stories.
8. Getting evaluation lessons across to a range of diverse audiences requires a sophisticated and concerted approach, particularly given the information overload affecting many. The importance of relevance, timeliness, brevity and quality were stressed. Moving from project evaluations to a higher level country or thematic focus was seen as an important way of increasing impact, particularly when evaluations can be timed to coincide with major policy reviews.
9. Internet-based communication tools are seen as an important addition to the evaluation toolbox, though they need to be used intelligently and are not a replacement for conventional approaches. While acknowledging the potential offered by new communication approaches, the value of 'learning by doing' and of face-to-face dialogue is still widely recognised.
10. Involving developing country partners in evaluation and lesson learning is seen as a major priority by many agencies, as most recognise that current practices fall far short of what is required for meaningful partnerships. Participation and dialogue needs to start right at the beginning of the project cycle rather than getting tacked on at the end, or squeezed out because of time constraints. Language issues and capacity building also need to be addressed much more seriously than in the past.

11. With new trends in aid delivery, the need for effective donor coordination is more urgent than ever. This points to the need for more joint evaluations and for much greater attention being given to lesson sharing between agencies.
12. The status of evaluation units is a big determinant of their impact within an organisation. For evaluation to become a key focus for learning and accountability, evaluation units need to have clear backing from senior management.
13. Evaluation units will need an injection of new skills, particularly in communication work, if they are to improve their feedback practices. Lack of resources, however, was not seen to be a major constraint since the case for better feedback is strong.
14. Although it was accepted that a standardised approach to improving evaluation feedback would not be appropriate, a number of areas for action were identified at various levels. Some of the main suggestions are presented in the form of a checklist in Box 1.
15. The overall consensus was that in relation to evaluation feedback the challenge for development agencies is to **do more and do it better**.

Box 1: Checklist of Action Points to Improve Evaluation Feedback

<i>Level</i>	<i>Checklist of action points*</i>
EVALUATION UNITS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Take steps to understand how learning happens within and outside the organisation, and identify where the blockages occur. ■ Assess how the relevance and timeliness of evaluation feedback can be improved, and take steps to ensure this happens. ■ Be explicit in identifying key audiences for evaluation feedback and the reasons for wanting to reach them, both in general, and in specific cases. ■ Get to know target groups better to find out what they want from evaluations, how they use evaluation information, and how feedback systems can respond better to these demands. ■ Develop a more strategic view of the how feedback approaches can be tailored to the needs of different audiences. ■ Make sure the quality of evaluation outputs is up to standard – particularly from the point of view of brevity, clarity and presentation. ■ Consider diversifying the range of approaches used to communicate with audiences, using 'non conventional' methods where appropriate. ■ Continue efforts to improve evaluation websites and intranets, recognising that ease of access and user-friendliness are key factors. ■ Take steps to ensure that full disclosure of evaluation reports becomes the norm and that proper approval and notification processes are in place so that senior management or key partners are not caught unawares by controversial findings. ■ Put much more effort into finding better ways of involving partner country stakeholders in evaluation work, including the feedback of evaluation lessons, recognising that language barriers are a key constraint. ■ Recruit specialist staff where necessary to fill skills gaps, particularly in communications work.

<p>AGENCY-WIDE & SENIOR MANAGEMENT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Review whether the role of central evaluation units needs to be reconsidered in order to improve knowledge flows and the exchange of skills and expertise between evaluation, operational or policy departments. ■ Consider whether the current positioning and status of evaluation units is limiting their effectiveness and undermining their ability to play a more active role in promoting learning and accountability, and take steps to rectify these problems if necessary. ■ Ensure that senior management is fully behind the move to improve evaluation feedback, and is providing leadership in this area. ■ Consider how evaluation lesson learning can be more effectively institutionalised, and identify where current feedback loops break down. ■ Establish a routine of briefing senior management on evaluation lessons, and involving them in the communication of major findings. ■ Take steps to increase the space and incentives for learning within the organisation (both from evaluations and other sources), and make it clear that failure to learn is no longer acceptable.
<p>INTER-AGENCY</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Put more serious effort into making sure joint evaluation missions happen, and that problems caused by differing approaches and timetables are addressed. ■ Reassess the future of the DAC Evaluation Inventory and develop a new strategy to ensure this becomes a more effective tool for lesson sharing. ■ Continue to use the DAC Working Party and other fora as a means of exchanging experience on evaluation feedback, and seeking out good practice. ■ Support initiatives to improve training and capacity building in development evaluation work, and create links between evaluation professionals internationally.
<p>PARTNER COUNTRIES</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Put pressure on donors to coordinate their evaluation efforts more effectively and involve in-country stakeholders in a more consistent and meaningful way. ■ Insist on being involved in evaluations right from the beginning of the process, and push for more ownership and control by local stakeholders. ■ Work to develop in-country capacity in monitoring and evaluation and an open culture where evaluation is seen as a positive opportunity for learning. ■ Decentralise responsibility for evaluation work, including feedback, beyond central ministries, bringing in civil society partners where appropriate. ■ Adopt a policy of full disclosure of evaluation results as a means of demonstrating accountability and opening up possibilities for learning.

** This list is not comprehensive but aims to set down some of the main areas where action was called for at the Workshop.*

2. Introduction

The need for improved evaluation feedback is widely recognised by development agencies, both on grounds of accountability and learning. Greater accountability is seen as a prerequisite for continued support for development assistance within donor countries, while also being a vital component in creating robust and meaningful partnerships with countries and organisation that are recipients of aid. Better learning is crucial in improving the effectiveness of aid and ensuring that the hard won lessons from experience – both positive and negative – are heeded. Evaluation feedback is an umbrella term describing the various channels and mechanisms by which these crucial messages get through – and make a difference.

The Tokyo Workshop of '**Evaluation Feedback for Effective Learning and Accountability**' (EFELA), held in September 2000, was convened by the DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation in order to focus in on this important topic. The Workshop brought together representatives from 19 donor countries or multilateral development agencies, and participants from 6 partner countries. Lasting two and a half days it consisted of a mix of plenary sessions where agencies gave short presentations on their experience, and a series of smaller working groups looking at particular themes in more detail. A full programme and list of participants is provided in Annexes 1 and 2.

In preparation for the Workshop, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), at the University of Sussex, was commissioned by Japan to prepare a Synthesis Report. This provided information on agencies' current feedback practices and an insight into the issues that Working Party Members see as being most crucial in improving evaluation feedback¹.

This Workshop Report builds on this earlier document and should be read in conjunction with it. This Report seeks to highlight the main points raised during the Workshop and draw out the areas of consensus that emerged, as well as the differences in approach and outlook between agencies.

These differences were one of the underlying features of the Workshop. As was pointed out in the earlier Synthesis Report, agencies are not all starting from the same place in terms of their approach to evaluation feedback, their audiences, their relative priorities, or the institutional context in which they work. So while everyone at the Workshop agreed on the urgent need to improve evaluation feedback it was clear that no one approach, or set of approaches, would suit all agencies. As one participant from China put it, this is a case where "*one medicine cannot cure all patients*". This point was reinforced by a colleague from the Philippines who commented that "*we shouldn't be looking for prescriptions it's outcomes that count*".

Discussions at the Workshop ranged over a wide area and tackled the subject of evaluation feedback from a number of different angles. This Report is grouped under a series of broad headings that correspond to the principle areas of debate.

¹ The Synthesis report was based on responses to a background questionnaire sent to all Working Party members, and follow-up interviews with a cross-section of agencies.

3. The Changing Aid Landscape

The Workshop took place against the background of a rapidly evolving aid landscape. Change is nothing new to the development assistance business. But at present there is a sense that the rate and extent of change is greater than it has been for many years. Some of the aspects that were highlighted include:

- **New agendas** – as Norway observed, development agencies face challenges caused by the crowded policy agenda. There are many elements to this including the need to address issues such as conflict reduction, anti-corruption and governance. Many of these suffer from definitional problems and unclear time horizons, which makes them intrinsically difficult to evaluate.
- **New mechanisms** – there are also a whole range of new aid mechanisms being tried. These include Sector Wide Approaches, the Comprehensive Development Framework, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, Poverty Reduction and Growth Frameworks, Medium Term Expenditure Frameworks, and the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach. Some of these imply fundamental changes in the way donors work, requiring significant shifts in how evaluation is approached.
- **New partners** – development agencies are finding themselves working with new partners and in different partnership configurations. Multi-donor consortia are becoming more common, and agencies are moving beyond government-to-government links to forge direct links with civil society. Some brand new partners are also emerging, such as the military, which is becoming a key partner for donors working in post-conflict or conflict resolution situations. This may mean working with UN-led forces, or developing working relationships with Ministries of Defence for interventions in countries such as Bosnia, Sierra Leone, and East Timor.²
- **New pressures** – the growing influence of international pressure groups is adding a new dimension to aid debates, as demonstrated in the recent Seattle and Prague protests. Often focusing on single issues, these groups have become highly skilled in gaining international media attention and using the internet to organise and mobilise. These groups may not be elected, representative or accountable, in a conventional sense, but they have become increasingly powerful and certainly cannot be ignored.
- **New horizons** – aid delivery has been shifting from project, to programme, to country level. But there is now an array of issues on the agenda which require a regional or global approach, for example, issues such as trade, migration, climate change, genetically modified organisms, and HIV/AIDS.

Agencies are having to adapt to these changes and this is creating many new challenges for evaluation units, requiring them to think and work in new ways. Discussion of evaluation feedback needs to be considered within this evolving context, learning from the past, but also looking to the future of where evaluation is heading.

² In the UK, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, DFID and the Ministry of Defence have agreed to pool money into a joint conflict prevention budget to maximise effort.

4. The Feedback Challenge

Learning and accountability

There was much discussion of the relationship between these dual goals of evaluation feedback, and their relative importance. While it was recognised that there is significant overlap between them, it was also seen that they are not identical, involving different target audiences and requiring sometimes quite different approaches. A range of views were expressed on how the two functions relate:

- Some agencies argued that accountability is still the core function of central evaluation units, and that the new emphasis on learning needs to build from this and not be seen as being in opposition to it. Separating them out, they felt, was creating a ‘false dichotomy’.
- Others see it differently and pointed out the tensions that can arise between the two; IFAD, for example, is now putting learning explicitly at the top of its agenda.
- SIDA suggested that it was useful to decide on a case-by-case basis whether learning or accountability was the priority in a particular evaluation. This would then affect the design of the evaluation and the role of stakeholders.
- The World Bank suggested that accountability should create the “*incentive framework for learning*”.
- From a partner country perspective, Lao PDR argued that learning and accountability are two sides of the same coin. Bangladesh commented that for them learning and accountability are a little different in practice, since learning is based in the Ministry of Planning implementation and monitoring unit, and accountability is more the preserve of the Auditor General. Therefore learning may not be owned across the system and may not translate into future activities.

These contrasting attitudes are partly a reflection of the differing backgrounds of agencies and the relative positioning of evaluation units within them. Evaluation units reporting directly to governing boards or to parliament, for example, are clearly in a different position compared to those more closely linked with policy or operational units. This has an important bearing on which audiences or stakeholders are *de facto* the highest priority, and what kinds of feedback tend to take precedence.

While there are differences in approach, it was agreed that this is not an either/or situation – both learning and accountability are vital. Of the two, however, learning is the area in which most agencies see the greatest need for improvement. Accountability has long been a core concern for evaluation units; learning is now the ‘new frontier’ where a whole range of new opportunities and challenges exist.

The learning frontier

Concepts of knowledge management and ‘learning organisations’ borrowed from the corporate sector have made considerable inroads into development agency thinking recently, although approaches and terminology vary. The Workshop considered how these concepts can be applied in an evaluation setting, recognising that evaluation units do not have a monopoly on knowledge. Compared to other departments, however, it was pointed out that they do have the advantage of being one of the most systematic in their approach, and having often the most comprehensive coverage.

They therefore have an important role to play as central knowledge holders and a significant stake in how new thinking on knowledge and learning evolves.

A number of agencies stressed the need to ‘unpack’ the language on learning and to clarify what is meant by it. Learning at the individual level, for example, is quite different from learning at the organisational level. There are also different stages in the learning process – from finding new results, to validating and verifying them, transferring them to others, and codifying them into guidelines. The World Bank contrasted three types of learning – learning from ‘doing’, from research, and from evaluation – and noted that mechanisms need to be in place to allow effective learning from sources outside the institution, as well as within it. France noted that evaluation reports are just one component in decision making, commenting that *“if it were so simple, our work would have been over a long time ago”*.

If evaluation units are to take on a proactive learning role they need to develop a more sophisticated view of how learning takes place within and between organisations, and where the bottlenecks arise. Several agencies are already addressing this challenge. AUSAID is undertaking a study to understand how their staff and consultants learn, as part of a wider exercise revising their lessons learned database. The study will be looking at formal and informal systems for knowledge management, information sharing and lesson learning across a range of functions, not just evaluation. Once they have a better understanding of this it will be possible to consider the format, design and modes of communication to be developed for evaluation feedback. CIDA has a Continuous Learning Division which works with the Performance Review Branch to develop best practice modules and ask the question “how are we learning?”. It also has a Corporate Memory Unit, which together with a contractor is working to organise the lessons learned into a coherent, subject-based, easily retrievable database.

Obstacles to learning

There are many obstacles that can get in the way of learning. Those brought up at the Workshop include:

- **Organisational culture** – some organisations have a culture where accountability tends to be associated with blame. This has the effect of discouraging openness and learning. In others, it is more acceptable to own up to mistakes and see these as opportunities for learning, recognising that there is often as much to learn from poorly performing projects as there is from success stories.
- **Pressure to spend** – learning takes time, and pressure to meet disbursement targets can lead to shortcuts being taken during project planning and approval stages, with lessons from previous experience being ignored or only selectively applied in the haste to get decisions through.
- **Lack of incentives to learn** – unless there are proper accountability loops built into the project cycle there may be little incentive to learn. This is particularly the case when staff or consultants shift from task to task, and have generally moved on long before the consequences of failure to learn are felt.
- **Tunnel vision** – the tendency of some staff or operational units to get stuck in a rut, carrying on with what they know, even when the shortcomings of the old familiar approaches are widely accepted.

- **Loss of institutional memory** – caused by frequent staff rotation or heavy reliance on short-term consultants, or by the weakening or disbanding of specialist departments.
- **Insecurity and the pace of change** – if staff are insecure or unclear what their objectives are, or if the departmental priorities are frequently shifting, this can have an adverse effect on learning.
- **The unequal nature of the aid relationship** – which tends to put donors in the driving seat, thereby inhibiting real partnerships and two-way knowledge sharing.

Many of these obstacles are deep seated, and cannot be changed overnight. However there was a broad acceptance of the need for ‘dig deep’ to locate where the obstacles to learning lie, and to find ways they can be attacked. Agencies expressed this in different ways, but many recognise that this is not just a question of fine-tuning; what is needed is a radical rethink of how organisations learn and are held accountable.

Addressing the demand side

A common feature of most evaluation feedback is that it tends to be supply driven, with the evaluation unit pumping out information on the assumption that it will be picked up. Though inevitable to some degree, several agencies pinpointed this is a key weakness in current feedback practices. Evaluation units were doing a reasonably good job on the supply side, as CIDA put it; it is the demand side that is their “*Achilles heel*”.³

The introduction of evaluation ‘help desks’ is one concrete way of addressing this. This idea has been tried out at the World Bank and is seen as a successful way of pointing people to relevant evaluation lessons (both within and outside the Bank) as and when they need the information. Help desk queries are currently running at 1000 per year, with 60% coming from outside the organisation. The Netherlands also plans to set up a help desk or knowledge centre to support decentralised evaluations.

5. Understanding Target Audiences

Better targeting

The Synthesis Report made a start at separating out some of the main audiences for evaluation feedback, distinguishing twelve main target groups and indicating which are likely to be priorities for learning purposes, as opposed to accountability. The aim was to underline both the diversity of audiences that evaluation units may be aiming to reach, the different reasons for wishing to target them, and the very basic point that one feedback approach is not going to suit them all.

This was a first approximation, and the Workshop provided an opportunity to break down target audiences further and start to look in more detail at different sub-groups⁴. No attempt was made to draw up a comprehensive list of all possible audiences for

³ Making this point another way, FAO commented that since demands are changing all the time, evaluation units need to “*respond to these changes if they are to survive*”.

⁴ The wide range of potential audiences for evaluation feedback was underlined in the presentation by Germany, which identified 17 main actors in the aid sector, within Germany alone.

evaluation feedback. The essential point is that priority audiences vary depending on the type of evaluation, the messages coming out, and the particular context in which evaluations are taking place. There was a recognition that more effort is needed in identifying and prioritising target audiences in specific cases, and that attention needs to be given to this early on in the process, not after the evaluation is completed.

Careful targeting allows intelligent tailoring of feedback approaches, a point that was underscored in the presentation by DANIDA. This broke down external audiences into three main groups and explained how different feedback ‘vehicles’ are used to target each of them (see Box 2). The point was made that given the diversity of potential audiences it is not realistic to try and reach everyone; agencies have to decide who is most important in specific cases, and make sure they get to them effectively.

BOX 2: Danida’s Approach in Matching Feedback Vehicles to Specific Audiences

Primary purpose → FEEDBACK VEHICLES	AUDIENCE GROUPS		
	Accountability Parliament Opinion makers/ leaders General public	Learning Academics, students, researchers External resource base (consultants etc.) NGOs	Partners Developing country partners Other development agencies
Evaluation reports		●	●
4 page summary	●	●	●
25 page popular version	●		
Press events	●		
Video/film	●		●
Annual report to Board	●		
Danida’s annual report	●		
Danid@visen newsletter	●		
Public meetings & Professional associations		●	
Lectures at universities & high schools		●	
World Wide Web	●	●	●
Seminars/workshops			●
Participation in evaluations			●

Source: Danida (2000), “External Feedback – Danida’s Dissemination Vehicles”, paper presented to DAC Tokyo Workshop on Evaluation Feedback for Effective Learning and Accountability, September 2000.

A number of audience groups were discussed in more detail. Experience of agencies in relation to four of the important external audiences within donor countries is summarised below.

Parliament, Ministers and Boards

For bilateral agencies, key ministers and parliamentary committees are often a crucial target audience, whereas governing boards of various forms play the equivalent role for most multilateral agencies. In both cases they require delicate handling. If good relationships are created, based on trust and regular dialogue, they can be a vital ally; anything less can spell serious problems for the agency.

Specific situations vary a great deal, depending on the reporting structures and personalities involved. For example:

- In Norway, aid evaluation is located in the Policy Planning and Evaluation Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When an evaluation report is finalised, a memorandum containing proposals for decisions is drafted and presented to the Minister and relevant political staff in order for follow-up decisions to be made. These meetings are a recent development and have provided a useful interface between the operational and the political levels, helping to raise awareness among political staff of the dilemmas and systemic difficulties in development cooperation. They have put the onus on the evaluation unit to make sure that recommendations are concrete and well thought out, and are based on a consensus among the relevant parties involved (a process which can take time, but which is valuable in its own right, and essential in terms of subsequent impact).
- In the Netherlands, there is an established system for feedback to Parliament. Evaluation reports are presented to the relevant Minister who then passes them on with an accompanying 'policy reaction' for discussion in Parliament. Creating a routine of regular meetings has helped sustain interest among the political staff, and means that bad news as well as good news can be discussed in a more balanced and informed way.
- In the UK, the Parliamentary Committee on International Development established by the current government has created a new axis of influence and power, and is keeping a much closer eye on the performance of DFID than in the past. It receives submissions from a wide range of sources and provides a very public forum where policy issues and controversies are aired.

A general message that came through at the Workshop is that frankness and openness are essential components in developing good relationships with these kinds of high level audiences. USAID commented how the US Congress are particularly suspicious of 'glowing reports', and has appreciated the Agency's efforts to be honest about where difficulties have occurred.

The Media

This same point was also emphasised in relation to feedback to the media, although relatively few evaluation units have a lot of experience working with the media. The risk of evaluation material being selectively quoted or used to create potentially damaging headlines was acknowledged. But, at the same time, most recognise the

important role of the media in holding agencies accountability and the valuable part they can play in raising awareness about development assistance more generally⁵.

Senior management are highly sensitive to media reports – both positive and negative – so getting media relations right is important. DANIDA is one the agencies that has done the most in terms of working with the media. They made the point that damaging headlines are based on three ingredients: (a) a development fiasco of some kind, that (b) is being covered up, and (c) is an exclusive story. By adopting an open policy, and releasing evaluation reports widely, the last two of these ingredients can be removed. So press releases are routinely issued, and these are backed up by press conferences which provide an opportunity for in depth explanation of the evaluation results. This approach has not solved the problem of occasional development fiascos, but it has led to a much more mature and constructive relationship with the media, which in turn has been important in maintaining the widespread support for development assistance among the Danish public⁶.

NGOs and CSOs

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) of various kinds are seen as an important audience for evaluation feedback, as well as partners in the evaluation process, and sometimes pioneers in developing new evaluation approaches, such as participatory monitoring and evaluation. Some agencies have taken steps to engage with these groups more systematically. The French now have a High Council for International Cooperation which includes academics and NGOs and enables an exchange of opinion with the government about development issues. Some agencies have a strategy of sending reports to key NGOs, CSOs, academics and other leading opinion makers in the development arena.

Establishing a constructive relationship with such groups is seen as an important step in broadening out the learning loop, and demonstrating accountability. But this is not without its pitfalls. One agency spoke of its experience in bringing NGOs in as participants in a major sectoral review, and how it was taken off guard when, the day the before the publication of a major report, some of the NGOs released a press statement attacking the document. From this they have learned that in future consultations of this kind they need to establish clear 'ground rules' and be alert to the possible diverging agendas involved, particularly when working with NGOs that have an active campaigning role and a sophisticated media department to go with it.

The General Public

The general public within donor countries are not normally regarded as an audience that can be reached directly with evaluation feedback. However, Japan is challenging this notion and has pioneered a programme to involve 'ordinary people' as public monitors of the country's development assistance effort.

The scheme started five years ago and is deliberately targeted at non-specialists such as 'small shop owners from down the street', 'fishermen', or 'ordinary housewives'. Groups are made up of four or five volunteers. They start with a one-day orientation seminar, then spend 7-10 days in the field visiting projects in several countries. They

⁵ Japan has taken this a step further and has included journalists in evaluation teams.

⁶ It was noted that according to a recent opinion survey in Denmark there is 73% support for the 1% GNP target for development assistance, even though only 50% believe that aid works.

are asked to write a short report on their return giving their common sense assessment of what they saw. These are combined into one document, so as to present a range of impressions side-by-side. These are then distributed in large numbers by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, using public outlets such as libraries and schools.

The scheme has proved popular and has been steadily expanding. More than 100 separate monitoring trips will be organised this year. The scheme does not claim to be rigorous, and it is not appropriate for all kinds of development projects⁷. But it has succeeded in shedding a totally new light on the Japanese aid effort, one which seems to be appreciated by the 'ordinary people' whose taxes fund the aid programme.

The case for disclosure

There was a broad consensus on the desirability of full disclosure of evaluation reports and considerable progress has been made in this direction in recent years. Several agencies admitted, however, that theory and practice were not always the same thing, and that they needed to do more ensure that reports are made available more promptly and systematically.

Disclosure of negative or controversial evaluation findings can obviously create difficulties for agencies, so it is important not to be naïve about possible fallout. But the overall view was that the benefits of disclosure in the long run make it worthwhile. Agency credibility is enhanced, and the willingness to publish negative reports helps to boost the validity of the positive ones⁸. Greater disclosure can also increase the pressure for more systematic follow-up of recommendations, while motivating those involved in evaluations to produce a better product, since they know their report will be made public, rather than being buried on a shelf somewhere.

6. Getting the Message Across

The Workshop provided a valuable opportunity for agencies to share experience on feedback approaches. Some of the most important communications lessons that emerged are summarised here.

Learning by doing

It was agreed that 'learning by doing' is often the most effective feedback route. People who are directly involved in evaluations, or the consultations surrounding them, have the greatest exposure to the specific lessons being learned and the context in which they apply. They are in the best position to internalise these lessons, and if the activity is to continue, to feed them in to the next stage of planning and implementation. It therefore makes sense to maximise these opportunities where possible, broadening out the consultation loop, and taking the time needed to share drafts and encourage buy-in to the evaluation process among key stakeholders.

⁷ Practical projects such as road building schemes, or support for elementary schools, are easiest for non-specialists to assess. This approach would not be appropriate for more complex projects such as balance of payments support.

⁸ One agency commented that in making all of its evaluation reports public it recognises that it is providing potential ammunition for critics. But it wants to develop a reputation as being an agency "that can make mistakes".

DANIDA and IFAD are among the agencies that placed particular emphasis on the need to do more in this area.

Though clearly important, this kind of feedback is obviously not the end of the story. Lessons need to be spread much more broadly if they are to have an impact beyond the immediate stakeholder group. This means sharing lessons with a wide variety of other audiences. The problem is that most of these are bombarded with material from other sources, are already suffering from information overload, and may have little time or motivation to pick up on lessons learned from evaluations that they have no direct connection with and no responsibility for. So this is where some of the biggest communication challenges lie.

Relevance

The perceived relevance of evaluation lessons is of prime importance in determining whether they will be picked up. The classic criticism of project evaluations is that the lessons emerging are either too specific or too general. An important way that agencies are addressing this is by shifting emphasis towards higher level, country-based, or thematic evaluations. These are likely to have much wider relevance and are therefore worth investing more in.

In some agencies there is an active debate on whether it is still appropriate for central evaluation units to carry out individual project evaluations at all. Some argue that this should be devolved entirely to operational departments, allowing evaluation units to concentrate on thematic or country work. Others make the case that independent project-level evaluations are an essential raw material for higher level analyses, so need to be continued in parallel.

Timeliness

Closely related is the question of timeliness. Because of the lag time in producing final reports and other spin-off products, evaluation feedback often ends up being “*too much, too late*”, as the Inter-American Development Bank put it. This can mean that the substantial investment in producing evaluation outputs is largely wasted, since the messages contained are written off as being out-of-date. This is particularly the case with ex-post evaluations, which tend to be looking back at initiatives that were planned quite a long time ago, and therefore reflect previous generations of aid thinking. Though the lessons emerging may be valid, that will often be dismissed as being no longer relevant.

Various approaches were put forward as ways of addressing this:

- Planning ahead so that evaluation outputs are timed to coincide with major policy events, for example, key conferences, or the preparation of sector or country strategies. These provide an ideal opportunity for evaluation lessons to be fed into broader processes.
- Putting more emphasis on mid-term evaluations, so the results can feed directly into subsequent planning.
- Finding ways of encouraging feedback during the evaluation process. There is obviously a balance here between obtaining final sign-off from all the stakeholders involved, and getting results out quickly. But if this can be tipped in favour of early release, especially when results are particularly significant or controversial, this is

likely to increase the chance of messages being picked up. A briefing note to senior management in advance of the publication of evaluation reports, for example, can be a useful way of alerting them to evaluation findings while they are still 'fresh'. This can increase the possibility of early follow-up action, while giving managers a chance to prepare an appropriate response if major problems are uncovered.

Quality issues

Several agencies stressed the importance of rigour and precision in drawing up evaluation lessons and good practice guidelines. Where recommendations are too vague or diffuse, where the evidence and analysis backing them up is weak, and where no distinctions are made between lessons that are locally applicable and those that have wider relevance, it is hardly surprising that messages fail to get through. Indeed, evaluation reports that are seen as sub-standard can do long term damage to the credibility of the evaluation unit.

A variety of approaches can be used to help assure quality – for example, reference groups, and peer review processes. Well-designed iterative consultation processes also help to raise standards. The point was made that evaluation units “*live or die by the quality of their work*”, and that is a fundamental issue that need to be addressed. Some are tackling this specifically. The World Bank, for instance, is currently developing guidelines and training to improve the quality of evaluation recommendations.

There were differing views, however, about the extent to which evaluation lessons can be successfully codified into good practice guidelines. EBRD sees this as a key function for evaluation units, whereas some other agencies argued that with the types of development assistance they were providing, the specificity of local country situations makes it difficult (and potentially dangerous) to generalise in this way.

Language barriers

The way that messages are phrased, and the language they are in, are crucial in terms of impact – whatever the medium being used. The Workshop underscored the importance of:

- **Brevity** – messages need to be presented in a way that is short, arresting, and to the point, otherwise many audiences will simply pass them by. “*We need to recognise that the time of people we’re trying to reach is very valuable*”, as one participant put it. Yet all too often the impression is that consultant’s reports are paid for by the kilo, rather than on the basis of their usefulness or digestibility. The more senior the audience, the more succinct the message needs to be. But in presenting ‘the tip of the iceberg’, it was stressed that the rest of the iceberg needs to be there to support it.
- **Terminology and language** – cutting out technical jargon is the first step. But most agencies are also acutely aware of the huge communication gap that exists when evaluation results are only made available in one language (usually English). This does not imply that all reports need to be translated into local languages, or that donor agencies are necessarily the best placed bodies to do this (in country partners may be in a better position to take it on). However, the need to address

this major failing – possibly in creative ways using radio, TV or video, for example, rather than paper-based approaches – was repeatedly underscored.

Intelligent use of the Internet

The new generation of internet-based communication approaches, including websites and internal intranets, are widely seen as a valuable addition to the evaluation toolkit. From a disclosure perspective, publishing evaluation reports on the agency's public website is an excellent and cost-effective way of opening up access to the material, although not necessarily a very targeted one. It can also be a useful consultation tool. In the recent World Bank review of the forestry sector, for example, the draft placed on the website attracted comments from over 200 people.

Internet tools need to be used well, however, in order to reap these benefits. While Working Group members have made an important start in setting up evaluation sections on their agency websites and/or intranets, most recognised they have a considerable way to go in climbing this new learning curve. A number commented that their 'first generation' websites and intranets were due for an overhaul, and that further work was needed to make them more accessible, up-to-date, and easy to navigate.

As more and more evaluation reports are made available electronically, the question emerges of how this data can be intelligently searched in order to extract the most relevant material when you type in search terms, rather than being swamped with screens full of variable quality data matches that need to be waded through. One way of tackling this problem is through more thorough indexing and 'tagging' of material, so the contents of documents are more clearly flagged with keywords. Another is through using new data 'mining' tools. The World Bank has been investigating the potential for using computer-based linguistic analysis. They have tested this out on a subset of 1200 evaluation summaries, with encouraging early results, suggesting that these tools can be helpful in zeroing in on relevant material and unearthing "*what we don't know we know*".

Another creative use of technology was mentioned by CIDA, which is developing a computer-based system whereby relevant prompting points 'pop up' on staff computer screens at key stages in the project development and approval process. These link in to CIDA's lessons learned database, and are a reminder to staff to consult previous experience.

But the limits of new technology and in particular the internet were also accepted. Though connectivity is improving fast, there are still big problems with internet access for many developing country audiences. There is also a strong tendency for systems to be designed based around supply side criteria, rather than a clear understanding of the way information is actually used. So it was recognised that while computer-based systems can be highly effective and need to be exploited, they are not a panacea, or a substitute for conventional feedback approaches.

Interagency lesson learning

The need for more effective sharing of evaluation lessons between donor agencies has long been recognised. This need is becoming even more acute with the advent of the new generation of Sector Wide Approaches and the introduction of Poverty

Reduction Strategies. These and other joint initiatives⁹ are premised on the assumption that coordinated agency action will be more effective than individual efforts. Yet mechanisms for exchanging evaluation lessons between agencies are still weak, and practical hurdles continue to get in the way of more frequent joint evaluations – which, when they do occur, are generally seen as a very good way of sharing lessons and methodologies. It was suggested that agencies have “*not been very imaginative*” in tackling this problem.

The DAC Inventory of evaluation summaries, set up in 1988, was an important first step in improving lesson sharing¹⁰. However, comments at the Workshop confirmed the view that the potential for the Inventory has yet to be fully realised and that it suffers from a number of significant shortcomings – notably its patchy coverage due to the inconsistent submission of data by many donors, the prevalence of older material in the database, its limited functionality, and that fact that it is not systematically cleaned.

The Workshop agreed that there is a need for a fresh look at the Inventory, and that this might be usefully discussed at the next Working Party meeting. With the increased publication of evaluation reports on donors’ own websites, it was suggested that a more decentralised approach to data storage might be preferable, with a user-friendly central search engine pointing users to relevant reports on agency websites. This would eliminate the problem of donors having to remember to submit summaries to the central database, though there would still be issues to tackle due to the lack of a standard format and approach in preparing reports.

One possibility would be for the redesign of this facility to be incorporated as part of the Global Development Gateway initiative being led by the World Bank¹¹. The DAC is already collaborating with this in carrying out tests on distributed data sharing. There is some debate, however, about the scope and direction of this initiative, so views may differ about the wisdom of linking these together.

The value of face-to-face communication

In evaluation feedback, as in other spheres, face-to-face dialogue is still the most effective way of sharing ideas and getting messages across. While recognising that new communication approaches are opening up important new channels of influence, several agencies made a point of underlining the continuing value of meetings, seminars and briefings of various kinds – both within the organisation and externally – as a indispensable focus for learning.

7. Involving Partners

There was widespread recognition at the Workshop of the need to do far more to involve partner country stakeholders – both as participants in the evaluation process and as audiences for the lessons that emerge. Although agencies were able to point to examples of where efforts had been made, most were very frank about their

⁹ For example, New Zealand is preparing recommendations on co-financing policies with multi-laterals and USAID has recently agreed to undertake pooled funding programmes.

¹⁰ The DAC inventory is hosted by CIDA and IDRC. See <http://miniweb.idrc.ca/cida/dacloge.htm>

¹¹ See <http://www.worldbank.org/gateway/>

shortcomings in this area. SIDA is one of the few that have gone as far as to look at how big this gap really is, and where the problems lie.

Reporting on a detailed study of the impact of nine previous evaluations among different groups of stakeholders¹², SIDA presented a revealing picture of how evaluation lessons fail to reach many of them, particularly those in partner countries. The report concluded that: *“The further away you are from the centre of the project in terms of power and involvement, the less information you receive on evaluation recommendations and findings.”* Many stakeholders were barred from acting on the results of evaluations because they never get to see the evaluation findings¹³.

The study also looked at the political context in which evaluations are conducted, noting that power relations tend to be heavily weighted in favour of the donor. It went on to state that *“for the majority of stakeholder the evaluation process could just as well have been left undone”* and that *“in terms of adherence to the present policy framework of Swedish aid (which stress partnership and ownership), the evaluation process as we know it is in dire need of reform”*.

These hard-hitting conclusions underlined the size of the challenge facing agencies if they are to turn the rhetoric of partnership into a reality.¹⁴ Among the points raised in discussion were the following:

- **Starting early** – trying to build meaningful participation in to ex-post evaluations is difficult if the project has not been planned or implemented in a participatory way. Buy-in from partners is likely to be much greater if they are involved right from the beginning of the project cycle.
- **Capacity building** – is an important priority if in-country partners are to be more fully involved in evaluations, and is a particular challenge in countries that are implementing active decentralisation policies. A number of initiatives were mentioned in this context¹⁵.
- **Trade-offs** – although involving partners in evaluation work is a highly desirable goal, the process takes longer and there may be compromises to be negotiated in terms of maintaining rigid standards of quality and impartiality. But these are trade-offs worth accepting if the process leads to greater buy-in and learning.
- **Risks** – in cases where controversial or politically unpopular findings are emerging, there may be risks for the local nationals involved in evaluation teams, either at a personal or organisational level. Evaluation teams need to be sensitive to these risks otherwise they can leave local team members in a very awkward situation when the visiting team has gone.

¹² “Are Evaluations Useful? Cases from Swedish Development Cooperation”, J. Carlsson et al, Sida Studies in Evaluation 99/1.

¹³ The study distinguished between different kinds of use of evaluation results, contrasting ‘**instrumental use**’ (where results feed directly into some kind of action), with ‘**conceptual use**’ (where they feed into policy processes), ‘**legitimising use**’ (where they are used to justify existing positions), ‘**ritual use**’ (where they are largely symbolic), and ‘**no use**’ (which speaks for itself). Worryingly, it found that ‘instrumental use’ is quite rare and that the most common pattern was ‘no use’.

¹⁴ IFAD talked of the need to consider “shifting the fulcrum of evaluation feedback to the South”.

¹⁵ For example, the Asian Development Bank is sponsoring a major programme in China to develop capacity for budget monitoring at a decentralised level; several representatives from this programme participated in the Workshop. The World Bank is developing an ‘International Program of Training in Development Evaluation’ (IPDE) in partnership with several other institutions.

- **Seminars** – in-country seminars are a valuable way of encouraging greater participation. Difficult messages can sometimes be delivered more easily if they are presented orally, especially in countries where there a culture of consensus being reached through discussion, rather than through reports on paper.
- **Participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E)** – was recognised as a valuable addition to the evaluation toolkit, and one which agencies need to gain experience in and set aside adequate time for. But some stressed that this needs to be kept in perspective, as it is not the answer in all situations.

An encouraging picture of how coordination between donors and partner countries can work was presented by the representative from the Lao PDR. She described a new Roundtable Process that has been introduced involving annual meetings between donors and government representatives¹⁶. These are designed to harmonise donor funding with evolving national development priorities, and to *“improve national development planning, programming, monitoring and evaluation, by continuously integrating lessons learned through an effective evaluation feedback mechanism”*.

This has opened up a useful *“two-way street”* for sharing lessons and priorities and has provided a forum where pressure can be applied on donors for them to be more accountable and to coordinate their efforts better, including sharing evaluation results. The point was also made that lesson learning needs to happen as soon as possible in the project cycle. This implies the need to share project monitoring information, not wait for ex-post evaluations before lessons can be learned.

8. Institutional Issues

The status of evaluation units

Underlying many of the Workshop debates was the question of the status of evaluation units within agencies. There is no doubt that this is a big factor in determining their impact. Evaluation units that are seen as being marginalised and remote from the centre of power are hardly likely to have a major influence in organisational learning terms, even if they are doing good work. To be taken seriously, evaluation units need to have strong senior management backing, with staff of sufficient status and qualifications. Some agencies argued that it is particularly important to have staff with experience at the implementation level. This is one way of avoiding the ‘ivory tower’ tendency – either real or perceived.

There was hot debate over the pros and cons of independence. Some agencies said that it is fundamental to the role of evaluation units, and is in fact their key attribute. Others argued that it can be a hindrance if independence becomes a barrier to partnership and dialogue. For example, FAO suggested that in a learning organisation with teamwork and a flow of knowledge within a learning cycle it may be more appropriate to de-emphasise the need for full independence, as there may be a risk that *“independence can lead to irrelevance”*.

There were similar divergences on the merits of rotating staff between evaluation units and operations. Some agencies advocate stability, which allows knowledge and expertise to accumulate, and makes it easier to maintain an independent role; the

¹⁶ The process is coordinated by the Committee for Investment and Cooperation, in the Prime Minister’s Office.

contrary view was that staff rotation is beneficial and encourages learning throughout the agency. However staffing is organised, it was pointed out that an 'us and them' view of operations and evaluation is not the best mindset for a learning organisation, and that where staff rotation does occur, it is helpful to have a system of debriefing to make sure experience is passed on rather than being dispersed.

Where there is a legacy of evaluation units being seen as policemen there is clearly work to be done. In the past, evaluation and audit functions tended to be perceived as being mostly about highlighting mistakes and allocating blame. With the shift to a more explicit learning role, it is possible to move on from this, although this transition will take time. Inevitably, evaluators have to be bearers of bad news at times, pointing out what has not worked. They need to balance this with efforts to communicate what the good news is, and where successes have occurred.

Institutionalising lesson learning

Institutionalising lesson learning, so that it becomes more reliable and systematic, was widely seen as being a key priority. *"Learning cannot be optional"*, as one participant put it.

A variety of examples were presented of where specific steps had been introduced to encourage this. These included the European Commission's use of a *"Fiche Contradictoire"*, a two column table with the recommendations drawn out by the Evaluation team in the left hand column, and the responses and action taken by those responsible in the right hand column. This is made available on the intranet for comment and published with the evaluation report.

The challenge is to make such systems effective in practice, not just on paper. Some of the points raised in this regard were:

- **Leadership** – senior management needs to champion lesson learning and recognise that it may mean working in different ways across the agency, including at senior management level. This is a point that is well accepted in the corporate sector. Quoting one leading source: *"The quality of leadership, embodied in the top management team process, determines the organisation's ability to learn"*.¹⁷ It was suggested by Japan that senior management would benefit from specific seminars to underline this message and make clear their pivotal role.
- **Consultants** – the high level of contracting out of work is an important factor to be considered. Consultants should be a key group in a learning organisation – both as producers and users of knowledge – but they are rarely identified or treated as such.
- **Staffing issues** – high staff turnover and staff shortages are a significant barrier to institutionalising lesson learning.
- **Carrot and stick** – improved packaging and distribution of evaluation lessons will not automatically lead to institutionalising lesson learning. Incentive structures to encourage learning need to be built into the system, or else penalties established for not taking account of previous lessons.

¹⁷ From 'How Organisations Learn', edited by Ken Starkey, International Thomson Business Press, 1996.

Results Based Management

As the Synthesis Report pointed out, there are parallels between evaluation feedback and some of the concepts involved in Results Based Management (RBM). The Workshop highlighted the varying levels of enthusiasm for RBM among agencies, as well as the different ways it is used.

USAID introduced Results Based Management in 1994 in order to encourage decentralisation of decision-making, and link budget allocations to objectives rather than activities. They presented a paper describing their experience. Some of the lessons they highlighted included the importance of collaborating with partners in performance management, and the need to use a variety of performance indicators and balance annual performance assessment and reporting with longer-term sustainable issues. They also stressed that assessment of results is just one factor in resource allocation decisions; other important factors include development needs, foreign policy considerations, and contributions of other donors.

A number of other variants on Results Based Management were also discussed. The DFID presentation focussed on the way the agency is responding to the introduction of 'Public Service Agreements', a government-wide initiative setting down commitments and targets over a three-year period. In the case of DFID, these are tied to the International Development Targets. Their presentation pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of the approach, but concluded that it does provide opportunities for linking decisions to performance more intelligently, provided it is applied carefully in a flexible, not mechanical, way. A paper was also submitted by Indonesia on their experience with performance evaluation as a management tool.

Evaluation units can play an important role as advocates of RBM approach, although there were mixed views as to how active this role can be. Some made that point that RBM is more useful for operational or policy departments, rather than evaluation work.

Staffing and resourcing

The question was posed as to whether improving evaluation feedback is going to be constrained by lack of resources, since many of the measures discussed will undoubtedly cost money. The consensus was that this is generally not the case. The constraints that exist are more to do with lack of time, and not having the right blend of staff skills. Provided the case for better evaluation feedback is clearly stated, and it is treated as a sufficient priority, most agencies felt that resources could be made available. And where there are trade-offs that have to be made, the clear view was that it is better to do fewer evaluations, but make sure the lessons from them are properly communicated, rather than carrying on with a large evaluation portfolio and wasting the opportunities they provide for learning. Otherwise, "*what is the point?*" as the Netherlands put it.

New staff skills will certainly be needed if agencies are going to gear up their feedback efforts in a significant way. Particularly important will be communication skills – in areas such as editing, translating, web site management, facilitation of workshops, media work, and suchlike. Since evaluation staff are not normally recruited with these skills in mind, for most agencies this will require bringing in qualified staff, or contracting work out to communication specialists. "*We are professional evaluators not professional communicators*", as the Chair of the Working Party put it in his closing

comments. His advice was that agencies should bring in expertise where it is needed, not try and *“do it all yourself”*.

The overall conclusion of the Workshop was that agencies need to take evaluation feedback much more seriously if they are to achieve the dual benefits of greater accountability and more effective learning. They need to ***“do more and do it better”***. The Workshop was seen as valuable step in that direction.