

Monitoring and evaluation in innovative projects. An explorative meeting.

On the 23th of April PSO organized an explorative meeting on 'learning from innovation' with member organisations that receive funding from the Innovation Fund. For a list of participants of the meeting see attached list.

With the innovation fund PSO supports members to apply innovative approaches to capacity development in the South, and would like to stimulate dialogue and sharing of experiences within the Association. There are many ways to monitor and report on achievements of projects and to look at innovation. As a part of the reporting requirements PSO invites member organisations to use innovative methods of monitoring and evaluation for their project. More focussed on learning than accountability, more qualitative than quantitative. PSO strives for reflection on innovation and drawing lessons from what has been learned and done. This implies that alternatives ways of communication should be explored to share experiences and lessons learned.

The following objectives were set for the meeting:

- How we can learn most from innovation projects at different levels?
- What information we need to be able to do so? What methods can be used to gain this information
- How can we share our lessons learned, make them accessible to people not involved in the project?
- How can PSO support in making this happen

Alfonso Gumucio-Dagron, expert on communication for social change and member of the International Advisory Board, was invited to contribute to this meeting. For more information about Alfonso, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfonso_Gumucio_Dagron

As a start of the meeting participants were asked to mention their expectations for this meeting. They varied from 'getting inspired on what is possible with M&E', 'getting to know other organisations' to 'get feedback on my presentation'. As a basis for further discussion two presentations were held:

Caspar Waalewijn of Tear gave a presentation on 'Supporting a more effective church response to HIV and Aids in Ethiopia through Action and Reflection learning'. For the presentation, see enclosed attachment. Christa Nooy of Both ENDS followed with a presentation on their project 'A Negotiated Approach to Ecosystems Management, an innovative approach for CSO involvement in Policy making'. This Powerpoint presentation is also attached to this e-mail.

The two Powerpoint presentations gave an impression of the diversity of the innovation projects. From the discussion and questions in reaction to the presentation it became clear that it is difficult to understand processes of innovation and the context in which innovation evolves from a short (Powerpoint) presentation.

In relation to the objective of the meeting and the content of the presentation and the discussion that followed, Alfonso recommended to take notice of the Pelican Initiative, a learning community on the

Internet that focuses on the central question: 'How can we learn more from what we do while at the same time having the biggest possible impact on the social change processes in which we engage?'

For more information on the Pelican Discussion, see:

<http://www.dgroups.org/groups/pelican/index.cfm?CookieTested=TRUE>

http://www.dgroups.org/groups/pelican/docs/Guidelines_Pelican-25Jan-FINAL.doc?ois=no

After a short break, a discussion started on ways to document and communicate on projects. The core question of this discussion was why do we want to document and for whom? For instance, organisations can document because they have to be accountable to donors. Donors often only want a 'pink paper', which only states the successes of a project, according to Alfonso: a distortion of reality. But it is legitimate, since small NGO's desperately need the external funding from their donors. Of course many organisations sincerely want to document a project in the best way, liable presented and understood by others. Alfonso: 'here are several options and methodologies to do so, but information really 'speaks' when people are asked to tell about how a project changed their lives.' Doing so the use of multimedia and video offer creative and effective ways for communication. Alfonso further states that documentation is a process. Organisations often only document something that is ended already. He emphasized that instead documenting should be used to support and accompany the process of implementation and development of the project. *Making waves* is a book Alfonso wrote for the Institute Communication for Social Change. This book shows fifty practical examples of using communication in the process of social change. See

http://www.communicationforsocialchange.org/pdf/making_waves.pdf

Karin Matthijssse of Stichting Kinderpostzegels Nederland gave a clear example on old and new ways of evaluation. Their innovative project focuses on raising self confidence of disadvantage youth in Bangalore by teaching them to dance. Youngsters part of the partner organisation in Bangalore are being trained by a dutch dancecompany, Ish, that works with underprivileged youth. They go into schools, show children their own talents and in this way work on building their self esteem.

When the issue of monitoring and evaluation came up, Karin proposed an evaluation form. The participants disagreed and said: Try to think like we do. We are youth, we are used to visual media and music. Why don't we use video as a way to show what has been reached?. That's what they make right now: they have interviewed the Dutch trainers and will be interview themselves on what they learn during the whole project.

Karin: 'We work with and for children a lot, so we would like to do that a lot more. This afternoon I have learned that documentation should start at the beginning of a project and not only in the end. We could ask questions like: What do you want to learn?'

This importance of baseline data was acknowledged by all participants. How can you document change when you do not have information about the situation at the start? There are different ways to gain this baseline information, people could for example be interviewed/ videoed and asked what they desire, want to change and hope for.

To illustrate the way video can be used, Alfonso gave another example about a video documentary he made about community radio: 'I am always re-energized when I go back to projects. I made video with the children that work for community radio and asked them: tell me in ten seconds what community radio is according to you. And they did. People are so clear on what they experience! I showed this video somewhere else and the response I got, was: 'You certainly told them what to say.' But not at all.'

Furthermore, different topics were addressed, like the connectivity of Internet changes. Also poor people use the Internet, they know Youtube just the same. Alfonso stated it is better if Internet is integrated with already existing communication structures, like community based radio. Main question is: 'What is the best way to get the message across?', instead of automatically looking for modern ways of communication for the sake of innovation.

Always ask, when documenting: why, for whom and how? This also accounts for documentation of innovation processes. People have different interests and information needs. So ask: What is really important for this target group? What is the most appropriate method to collect information and get the message across?

The most significant change-method is one method to apply for M&E of innovation projects. For a practical guide to this instrument, see: <http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf>

Jaap Vink of Stro explained how they try to be innovative. They made a game with open source software, where players can choose what sort of economical activity they want and what kind of currency (real money, alternatives to money) they want to use. The game gives a virtual example what the consequences would be in reality. For more information on this game, see: www.socialtradegame.org. Use login: johndoe and password: 1234 to play a draftversion of the game.

Veronique Ehlen of MCNV explained they want to give special attention to the fact MCNV celebrates its 40th anniversary this year and they want to document the innovative experiences the organisation has gathered in all these years. But how to do so? So many experiences to show, so many cases to tell. How to make an interesting selection and find appropriate ways to share experiences? As other organisations also MCNV is struggling with this issue.

In the end, everyone was asked to mention what was the most interesting lesson they gained from this meeting. The answers varied from 'the importance of developing good indicators to follow processes of change', 'revived enthusiasm on the use of video' and 'networking with similar organisations' to 'making the link from abstract stories on innovation to what it means in reality.'

Alfonso stated that it is remarkable that communication in developing organisations is not seen as important, it is in the back of the head only. He proposed that we should not allow any new project to exist without a communication component in it. A percentage of the funding should be allocated to communication, since that is what helps the process to go forward, and to guarantee sustainability.

Afterwards participants were asked to fill in a reflection form. Here some of the answers we want to share with you:

'We need to move from information gatherers to knowledge exchangers.'

'We have to listen more attentively to what people are saying of feeling as valid changes and impacts of our projects.'

'I want to know techniques and tools to document processes of change, for example how to establish a baseline at the start of a project. Which questions are crucial?'

'I would like PSO to organise sessions for specific questions, e.g. how can we use video for documentation or how can we develop the right indicators to document changes?'

'I would like to see how we can use the most significant change method for all innovative projects.'

'I would like PSO to be a broker in knowledge and help with dissemination. For example on learning visits/exchange and coaching between organisations.'

This explorative session has showed the need to explore alternative ways of communication and documentation to grasp processes of change that take place in the South, and share our lessons learned. Among the member organisations of PSO there is a large variety of knowledge and experiences in this area. There is a need for a number of focused, in depth sessions in which different methods are being explained, discussed and visualised on the basis of concrete experiences. As a follow up on this meeting PSO will play a role in facilitating sharing of lessons learned and experiences using the PSO website. Soon you can expect invitations for focussed sessions around the topic M&E of innovation.

Annex 1

Deelnemers bijeenkomst 'leren van innoveren', 23 april 2008

Deelnemers
Nick Peacock, Oxfam Novib
Arelys de Yanez, Oxfam Novib
Veronique Ehlen, MCNV
Jaap Vink, STRO
Caspar Waalewijn, TEAR
Christa Nooij, Bothends
Annelieke Douma, Bothends
Woutine van Beek, AMREF
Edith Kroese, AVANCE
Karin Matthijsse, Stichting Kinderpostzegels
Petra Staal, PSO
Anneke Maarse, PSO
Jacqueline Verhagen, PSO
Anne Sijtsema, PSO
Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, IAB (PSO)