



# **No Perfect Measure**

## **Rethinking Evaluation and Assessment of Human Rights Work**

**Report of a Workshop**

## ABOUT THE ICHRP

The International Council on Human Rights Policy (ICHRP) was established in Geneva in 1998 to conduct applied research into current human rights issues. Its research is designed to be of practical relevance to policy-makers in international and regional organisations, in governments and inter-governmental agencies, and in voluntary organisations of all kinds. The ICHRP is independent, international in its membership, and participatory in its approach. It is registered as a non-profit foundation under Swiss law.

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## INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

A combination of factors, including increasing professionalization of social action, geopolitical shifts and developments in the global economy, the growth of philanthrocapitalism<sup>1</sup> and the expanding roles played by NGOs in governance, have resulted in profound shifts in approaches to programming, evaluation and funding of human rights work. One of the most significant consequences is the increasing emphasis within the human rights community as well as from donors, evaluators and others on assessing and measuring the 'impact' of human rights interventions. More generally, the voluntary and non-profit sector today is feeling the full impact of the emergence of 'results-based management' and 'value for money' or 'audit' culture, and human rights organisations too are feeling the pressure to prove their 'impact', 'value' or 'success'.

The rise of 'new public management' and the management sciences in the 1980s marked the beginning of profound changes in the private and public sectors, most notably in terms of subjecting outcomes to measurements to ascertain economy, efficiency and effectiveness. A "measurement revolution" has since taken hold in relation to human rights work as well. Beginning with attempts to quantify such "elusive concepts" as democracy, discrimination, corruption, freedom and governance,<sup>2</sup> it has led, more recently, to the investment of significant resources in the development of indicators and tools to measure everything ranging from state compliance to effectiveness of human rights interventions.

While better understanding and analysis of the successes and failures of human rights work is undoubtedly necessary, there are widespread concerns that current assessment and evaluation techniques are not sufficient to measure the complexities of social change processes, especially those driven by human rights. For the most part this concern stems from the understanding that the methods and approaches used are not specifically developed for human rights work or by human rights practitioners, but rather are transplanted from development

practice or even business.<sup>3</sup>

It was in this context that the ICHRP initiated work on approaches to assessing and evaluating human rights work. In March 2011, the ICHRP published an Approach Paper<sup>4</sup> to outline the challenges of assessing the impact and effectiveness of human rights work, and the role and relevance of human rights principles in this process. As a next step, the ICHRP convened a practice and research workshop to further explore the issue, bringing together human rights advocates, evaluation practitioners and theorists, donors, policy researchers, development professionals and other relevant experts. The objective was to reflect on current challenges and opportunities and particularly how approaches to evaluation themselves impact human rights work.

The workshop was not designed to explore or identify the 'best' methodologies or practices, although some good practice was indeed exchanged. As one participant said, there are almost as many impact assessment tools out there as there are actual assessments; therefore, a shift to examine the issues of core principles is more valuable at this point. The workshop was intended primarily as a forum to:

- a) reflect on the underlying political and normative issues and concerns rather than technical solutions;
- b) discuss how to change the terms of the debate around evaluation and impact assessment and define possible directions of change, taking into account the complexities of human rights work.

This report does not attempt to summarise the proceedings of the workshop, although its structure loosely reflects the agenda of the meeting. Instead, it draws together key issues that emerged from the discussion and raises a number of important ways of thinking, including questions to be given further consideration. It also draws on literature that was not discussed at the workshop, where appropriate, to complement or clarify issues further. In keeping with the spirit of the workshop, remarks and comments are not attributed by name but speech marks (" ") are used to indicate when participants are quoted verbatim.

1 A term that entered common parlance in 2006 to describe the drive for philanthropy to become more like for-profit markets with 'investors' and 'social returns'. See [www.ssireview.org/point\\_counterpoint/philanthrocapitalism](http://www.ssireview.org/point_counterpoint/philanthrocapitalism) and [www.economist.com/node/5517656](http://www.economist.com/node/5517656).

2 Kate Desormeau & Michael Ignatieff, "Measurement and Human Rights: Tracking Progress, Assessing Impact", A Carr Center for Human Rights Policy Project Report, Summer 2005, p. 1. Available at: [www.hks.harvard.edu/cchrp/mhr/publications/documents/MeasurementReport2005.pdf](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/cchrp/mhr/publications/documents/MeasurementReport2005.pdf).

3 Snibbe highlights the underlying assumption that the work of non-profits can be measured cheaply and in a cost-effective manner, similar to measuring business performance through profit. Alana Corner Snibbe, "Drowning in Data", *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2006. Available at: [www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/drowning\\_in\\_data/](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/drowning_in_data/).

4 Available at: [www.ichrp.org/files/papers/186/impact\\_assessment\\_human\\_rights\\_approach\\_paper.pdf](http://www.ichrp.org/files/papers/186/impact_assessment_human_rights_approach_paper.pdf)



## PART I: RIGHTS AND RESULTS

### 1. HUMAN RIGHTS WORK IN THE TIME OF A RESULTS-BASED CULTURE

In the 1990s Michael Power described an ‘audit explosion’ across many different sectors, characterised by the emergence of audit not just as a technique but as an idea, one that “has much to do with articulating values, with rationalising and reinforcing public images of control.”<sup>5</sup> From across the spectrum of Power’s arguments, there are five dimensions<sup>6</sup> of the audit explosion that are especially pertinent to discussions in this report:

- a) The power of audits lie in the manner in which environments are made and structured to become auditable;
- b) Where audits fail, the common response is to call for more audits;
- c) More than passive monitoring, audits shape standards of performance and conceptions of the very problems they claim to solve;
- d) ‘Value for money’ audits (which are a key driver of these changes) result, firstly, in a drift towards numbers to assess economy, efficiency and effectiveness; and secondly, in a strong emphasis on ‘good management’ above all else;
- e) The rise of audits marks a shift in power from the public to the professionals and specialists, in particular to managers and overseers.

It is striking that merely replacing ‘audits’ with ‘results-based management’, or even ‘impact assessments’ or ‘evaluations’ in the five points above aptly conveys some of the current perceptions and concerns, expressed in different ways throughout the workshop, regarding the impact of these discourses on human rights work.

Results-based management (RBM) and similar log frame systems have become widespread first and foremost because of donors – who sometimes directly transferred or adapted practices from the business world in which many philanthropic institutions have their roots.<sup>7</sup> However another factor, more internal, was the push within the human rights community to understand if their work is ‘making a difference’, and if so how. For

example, one workshop participant maintained that being able to assess impacts “gave a sense of purpose”.

So, what then is the problem? As another participant observed, the central concern is not RBM itself but its transformation “from a tool to a paradigm” leading over time to the increasing entrenchment of potentially technocratic approaches, which seem to shape what organisations are, not just aspects of their work. For example, value-for-money (economy, efficiency and effectiveness) and a results-based culture were central to the UK Department for International Development’s (DFID) recent multilateral aid review.<sup>8</sup> In short, most funders, bilateral and private foundations, are looking, like DFID, for “organisations with: a clear mandate and strategy; effective leadership and governance structures; a results culture and results based management systems with comprehensive results frameworks including baselines and targets at the input, output and outcome level...”<sup>9</sup>

Are evaluation methods and frames of impact assessment actually exerting a disproportionate pressure on the narratives and practices of human rights work, distorting priorities, objectives and processes? The challenge is captured in the observation of one participant that human rights organisations often had “too broad a justice perspective – [donors] are looking for measurable impact on people.”

A major concern with RBM is the fact that it focuses essentially on measuring outcomes or impacts against goals that were stated at the outset.<sup>10</sup> While this can encourage human rights organisations to be more strategic and plan ahead consistently, the very focus on results could well risk disregarding or lowering sensitivity to processes, changes, and outcomes that were not envisaged from the outset. The RBM approach was described by one participant as, at its worst, like hammering a nail into the wall; the wall around the nail may crumble but this goes unnoticed as long as the nail is in the wall.

At the meeting, some participants expressed concern that evaluators were not incorporating the “do no harm” principle into their evaluations, demonstrating that results-based methodologies are often unable to account for the wider, unplanned positive or negative impacts of an

5 Michael Power, *The Audit Explosion*, Demos, 1996, p. 5.

6 Ibid. See pp. 5, 7, 26 and 38.

7 In fact, *Evaluating Training Activities in Human Rights Education*, a handbook published by the Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights in collaboration with Equitas, confirms how international donors and multilateral organisations often insist that human rights organisations apply the RBM approach to their evaluation work. Available at: [www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/EvaluationHandbookPT18.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/EvaluationHandbookPT18.pdf).

8 Department for International Development, *Multilateral Aid Review*, March 2011. Available at: [www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications1/mar/multilateral\\_aid\\_review.pdf](http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications1/mar/multilateral_aid_review.pdf).

9 Ibid.

10 Indeed, logical framework approaches are also known as Goal Oriented Project Planning (GOPP).

intervention. This would require a recognition of the 'externalities' of human rights work: for instance, one participant noted that an organisation whose staff members travel all over the world for advocacy, research or meetings will have a very high carbon footprint, thereby contributing to climate change, itself a cause of severe violations of human rights.

At least two other significant related concerns seemed to come through the discussions in this respect:

- a) That human rights work is being driven into "what's measurable instead of what matters" (i.e., that a focus on programming with benchmarks and predicted outcomes/impacts is actually narrowing or diluting visions of broad social change or justice);
- b) The fact that advocates and organisations "are justifying themselves not in terms of being [part of] a social movement but of trying to achieve specific goals", demonstrably measurement-friendly.

However, that which is measurable by indicators is no replacement for a qualitative and political engagement with process and context. Since evaluation inevitably feeds back into and shapes practice, there is a real danger that as human rights practice increasingly adapts to the technocratic requirements imposed by external actors it will distance itself from its normative foundations.<sup>11</sup>

It was observed that the very language of results, in the current political climate and funding environment, has the power to "trap your way of thinking about [human rights] work". Indeed this is something everyone – donor, grantee or evaluator – is vulnerable to. Seen this way, the idea of 'common metrics' and reporting, while possibly attractive, also raises the spectre of forcing a common language, one that can "lose all meaning" stripped of contextual richness, and in turn undermine the political content so central to human rights work. One participant warned that the overbearing power of the results culture could lead to 'isomorphic mimicry' (i.e., organisations increasingly pushed to replicate those that are 'successful'). Over time, this could lead to a levelling of the field, a migration to the middle ground, and an erosion of more radical, risky and innovative approaches.

## 2. QUESTIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND POWER

Few will disagree that accountability, especially to the core constituencies human rights organisations work with, is of paramount

importance. As human rights organisations have grown in visibility and influence, and especially as they engage deeper with policy implementation questions, there is an inevitable rise in demands for accountability, effectiveness and independent and objective methods of evaluation. However, as one participant stressed, human rights organisations are of course by no means accountability-free at present, and in fact are constantly engaged in answering for their work to peers, members, donors, governmental authorities, victims of human rights violations and local communities. Human rights organisations have also initiated or engaged with processes for developing frameworks for accountability at both national and international levels.<sup>12</sup>

While donor practices and approaches certainly vary with respect to evaluations, especially between governmental donors and private foundations, there is little doubt that currently donors as a body exert the biggest influence on evaluation practice, with a view to enhancing effectiveness and accountability. The question is whether the currently dominant results-based culture actually leads to meaningful accountability.

Accountability should not be viewed as relevant to grantees alone. Donors of course also face pressure in various forms of accountability to their members, trustees, and/or tax-payers. Governmental donors must demonstrate with as much clarity as possible that the public's money is spent effectively, an even more pressing concern in an era of strapped resources. Needless to say, the accountability and reporting frameworks that donors are embedded in, also shape their priorities, programming and evaluation practices. For instance, one participant suggested that it is no coincidence that the length of project-funding cycles of many bilateral donors often correlate with the length of the electoral cycle. On the other hand, private foundations and philanthropists may – consciously or unconsciously – see themselves as agents of active social change, viewing human rights organisations as their "sub-contractors". It is conceivable that in such relationships evaluation may be understood quite differently by both parties.

In addition, one participant forcefully noted that there is a case for making demands of "mutual accountability" from donors, giving the example of how many governments fund human rights organisations while at the same time funding arms manufacture or fuelling foreign conflicts. The detrimental impact that conditionalities and restrictions imposed by the US on funding global health programmes have had on the right to health of women in low-income countries is another

<sup>11</sup> Paul Gready, "Reasons to be Cautious about Evidence and Evaluation: Rights based approaches to development and the emerging culture of evaluation", *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 2009, Vol.1, No. 3, p. 383.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., the International NGO Accountability Charter. Available at: [www.ingoaccountabilitycharter.org](http://www.ingoaccountabilitycharter.org).

## Box 1: Results-based management and human rights in the United Nations

Flaminia Minelli, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

The main challenge for the Policy, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Section (PPMES) continues to be the adaptation of the results-based management model – strongly called for by Member States, and by the United Nations system – to human rights work. In recent years, OHCHR has adopted innovative practices to integrate the RBM process with the content, standards and principles of a human rights-based approach to programming. This has provided an opportunity for OHCHR to redirect scarce resources towards key results and have the potential for demonstrating real impact. In pushing the limits of the classic RBM model to adapt to the unique requirements of human rights work, PPMES has demonstrated the potential of this model, which is often perceived as too rigid by the human rights community.

Apart from consistently combining results-based management with the human rights-based approach to programming, the following interpretative adaptations have been adopted:

- OHCHR defines a result not only as a change but also as the prevention of a negative change, when it operates to prevent the deterioration of compliance with international human rights standards;
- OHCHR accepts that, because of its mandate, it may need to continue investing resources in challenging human rights areas where it is known that results may not be achievable within a given programming cycle;
- OHCHR recognises that human rights results are the outcome of a combination of factors and of the work of many diverse actors; consequently, OHCHR rarely speaks of attribution and prefers to highlight its collaborative contribution to the achievement of results, and those of its partners, in its reporting;
- Considering the confidentiality parameters within which it often operates, both in relation to duty bearers and rights-holders (and particularly victims of human rights violations), OHCHR does not publicly report on all of its results.

pertinent example.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the power relationship is such that grantees holding donors accountable is all but impossible, leaving human rights organisations (many of whom also feel that their perceived independence and credibility is affected by relationships with governments) with difficult decisions to make about whether or not to accept money in such circumstances.

Many participants suggested that *countability* does not necessarily lead to *accountability*. When an environment – organisation or process – is structured for audit, it is designed to be, first and foremost, rendered more explicable in the terms set by the auditor but not necessarily more accountable in some wider, public sense.<sup>14</sup> Hence the concern that the current results culture tends to be significantly skewed towards promoting upward accountability (i.e., to donors).<sup>15</sup> Indeed,

as evaluation methodologies have become more complex and specialised they have tended to recede further into the domain of experts. Evaluation has become a highly specialised field with its own vocabulary and interests; “an elite epistemic community” or “an industry”, as some participants put it, raising questions about the accountability of evaluators themselves. As one participant noted “Who is evaluating the evaluators?”

The importance of addressing conflicts of interest with respect to evaluators also emerged as a concern. It is ironic that ‘independent evaluation’ is sometimes carried out by individuals or entities that can in no sense be considered truly independent. Evaluation is a highly lucrative industry today and has attracted investment from a number of sources. Large private corporations, with interests in activities that are profoundly antagonistic to human rights work, may also own or control evaluation consultancies. For example, one of the organisations represented at the workshop had the experience of a donor awarding an evaluation contract to a private firm that was part of a larger business with interests in security, natural resource extraction, infrastructure development etc., all of which engage many human rights concerns. It is in this context that the recommendation that human rights organisations and donors develop clear policies with respect to flagging potential conflicts

13 See, e.g., Jamila Taylor and Anu Kumar, “How Existing US Policy Limits Global Health and the Achievement of Millennium Development Goals and to Improve Maternal health and Promote Gender equality” in *The Yale Journal*. Winter 2011, pp. 43–52. Available at: [yalejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/116108taylor-kumar.pdf](http://yalejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/116108taylor-kumar.pdf).

14 Power, 1996, pp.6.

15 Alnoor Ebrahim & V. Kasturi Rangan, “The Limits of Nonprofit Impact: A Contingency Framework for Measuring Social Performance”, *Harvard Business School Working Paper*, 10-099, 2010, p. 12.

of interest concerning consultants bidding for evaluation work assumes significant relevance.

Evaluation is often perceived as a technical, specialist exercise that can only be performed by 'experts' rather than staff from within an organisation. Additionally, the general feeling is that donors perceive external evaluations as more credible and thus more valuable. This further entrenches the power of evaluation practitioners. However, as was pointed out, a 'professional distance' may also converge with other kinds of distances, including from the social, political and organisational context and history, which can limit or distort comprehension of change. This is further accentuated by additional power dynamics when consultants or evaluators from the global North, appointed by donors, are evaluating interventions in the South. One participant described the increasing transactions involving donors, evaluators and NGOs as akin to "*bureau-de-change* transactions" – losing value with each link in the chain, in terms of understanding, insight and sensitivity to the local context.

In addition, as was observed, while employing external evaluators can be beneficial, bringing new perspectives, transparency and impartiality, they can also deprive the organisation of valuable learning opportunities (see "From Judgement to Learning" on page 13). Some participants also argued that members of the public or rights holders would engage more openly with members or staff of an organisation, perceiving them to care more about, and be more sensitive to, the issues at stake.

At its core, evaluation is about assessing how far *expectations* of one sort or another have been met. However, as argued elsewhere in this report, the predictions required for such an exercise are difficult-to-impossible in much human rights work. It is therefore important that donors and evaluators are more flexible about setting, reviewing, and revising these expectations, where they can. This may mean relying in part on *trust* rather than verification, an element of the donor–grantee relationship that was repeatedly described as lacking. Some participants at the workshop raised the provocative question of what, exactly, is so wrong with a fully trust-based and non-standardised approach to assessment, particularly in the case of a private foundation with few statutory obligations in this regard? All this begs the question of whether donors "are actually willing to cede the power" they wield and engage in a meaningful open-ended process of developing more relevant approaches to evaluation and accountability.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> According to Hailey, comparative research conducted by the Maastricht based ECDPM demonstrates that external evaluations are increasingly identified as "inappropriate or counter-productive", suggesting self-assessment as a more effective evaluation method. Hailey and James, in *NGO Capacity Building: The Challenge of Impact Assessment*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 4.

### 3. THE PARTICULARITIES OF HUMAN RIGHTS WORK

A common frustration of human rights organisations facing evaluations or impact assessments is that the frameworks used have often been designed for development or humanitarian work.<sup>17</sup> The workshop explored whether there were any particular challenges facing evaluation and impact assessment in the field of human rights. Several participants argued that perhaps human rights work is not as unique as its practitioners sometimes seem to think; reference was made to the Big Push Forward,<sup>18</sup> an initiative that shows development organisations are facing similar challenges with regard to evaluation and assessing their impact. Indeed, both development work and human rights work encompass a huge spectrum of (sometimes overlapping or at least mutually reinforcing) activities. Human rights and development work both take place within dynamic environments; both are inevitably highly contextualised, involving a multiplicity of actors and engagement with various levels of power relations. Predicting results in such environments is fraught with error or even danger, and causal relationships are difficult to determine, making attribution problematic. Thus, any easy claim by human rights activists that their work is

<sup>17</sup> One participant shared the example of a recent funding call for human rights issued by a major bilateral donor. The rigidly structured application format was clearly designed for development grants and was thus inappropriate. For instance, "outputs" were defined as "the products, capital goods and services, which result from a *development* intervention" (emphasis added). The formulated outcomes had to "fall within the programme's span of influence", almost impossible to predict for activities such as human rights advocacy, unless the ambition was substantially narrowed down. The accompanying model application form was constructed around a proposal for enhancing employability of people in poverty and neither the problem nor the solution, nor indeed the indicators, were articulated in human rights terms. The measures of effectiveness proposed were quantitative (number of people trained; number employed successfully etc.). On the whole, the application form and model were far from applicable to a human rights approach, especially advocacy. It was almost impossible for a human rights advocacy proposal to meet the standards set unless it was significantly reshaped to suit the requirements and demands set by the call itself.

<sup>18</sup> The *Big Push Forward* is a network of practitioners identifying and sharing strategies for encouraging funders and implementers to experiment with different approaches to impact assessment and reporting of international aid programmes and projects. Conceived in 2010 in reaction to a narrowing of what is valued and how value is measured, The *Big Push Forward* initiative seeks constructive ways to advance conceptually and methodologically for assessing the impact of development aid in support of a fairer world, beyond the narrow bureaucratic protocols that assume guaranteed predictable outcomes. It seeks to tackle and take progressive action on a number of important issues, including challenging the dominant 'value' and 'impact' discourses, expanding space for voices from the Global South in development debates, developing different methods of reporting, and enhancing organisational learning and reflective practice. See [www.bigpushforward.net](http://www.bigpushforward.net).

somehow less amenable to measurement than anything else can appear self-serving to external commentators. At the same time, the discussions did highlight some challenges that were felt to be particular to, or at least especially relevant for, evaluating or assessing human rights work.

Perhaps the most clear-cut particularity of human rights work was felt to be its grounding in an international legal framework with accompanying mechanisms. This engenders the most basic aspect of human rights work – holding states to account, publicly and often internationally, for their actions, measured against these legal obligations.

This framework allows human rights organisations to authoritatively highlight breaches of responsibilities at national and international levels by ‘naming and shaming’. Governments are placed ‘in the dock’ of public opinion. This ‘adversarial’ methodology common to many human rights organisations prompted one participant to say, “You never see host governments working with domestic human rights organisations”. In fact, an increasing number of human rights organisations work in collaboration with governments, for example training police

forces or running legal advice centres. However, development and humanitarian organisations more often work to create ‘partnerships’ with government agencies and rarely focus as much attention on who is to “blame” or who should be held to account, but rather concentrate on more immediate and practical needs. The focus on accountability as opposed to cooperation means that human rights work is often considered more politicised in nature than the work of development and humanitarian communities. Moreover, human rights advocates, especially when they name-and-shame, are more likely to be the direct (rather than indirect) targets of government repression. Thus, many participants pointed out that in contexts that are severely repressive, merely managing to keep a human rights organisation alive, however skeletal and limited its work, should count as a significant success.

Secondly, in the case of human rights work claims of attribution or even contribution are generally more difficult to make or sustain. Many would argue that the claims of “attribution” that can be made by, for instance, service delivery

## **Box 2: Impact assessment in the context of prevention of torture**

*Vincent Ploton, Association for the Prevention of Torture (APT)*

As a human rights organisation focused on prevention, APT faces several particular challenges in assessing its impact. The following is a summary of some of the issues and APT’s approaches:

### *1. Limits: reliability of data, causality*

Although quantifying human rights violations presents inherent risks and difficulties, assessing preventative human rights action poses a particular challenge of data reliability. At APT, we consider that quantitative approaches to measuring torture are unreliable, and therefore examine prevalence of risks for torture, rather than prevalence of torture itself. This issue of causality is again especially relevant for prevention, as the fact that no change happened can itself constitute evidence of a positive impact – but evidencing the link between absence of change and preventive action is almost impossible.

### *2. Don’t be seduced just by tangible changes and concrete victories*

Concrete examples of change which lessen the risk of torture are available. For example, the Maldives “National Preventative Mechanism” succeeded in closing one prison where the treatment of prisoners was particularly horrendous, while the French NPM managed to strip migration police of lethal weapons. These examples, while valuable, should not undermine the potentially wider impact new laws and legal cultures can have, although evidence of their effects may be more difficult to produce.

### *3. Assessing a negative occurrence through positive developments*

Preventing torture and other human rights violations requires fostering an environment and culture conducive to avoiding or lessening the risk of abuse, especially amongst sectors such as law enforcement. APT considers that torture prevention work can be “assessed” by looking at positive changes in such an environment and culture. Examples include the implementation of basic safeguards such as access to independent medical checks, legal advice following arrest and video surveillance in police stations.

### *4. Risk mitigation and environment building*

In general, the absence of safeguards and legal cultures that do not integrate universal human rights standards can increase the likelihood of violations. We thus use tools and methods, including advocacy and capacity building, which can contribute to building an environment where the risk can be neutralised and lessened in a demonstrable way.

groups, can never be made by human rights groups, and that even claims of “contribution” to change can prove difficult. For the most part, human rights claims require change on the part of government, and changes at this level are rarely easy to achieve. Indeed, states will rarely attribute change in policy to pressure from human rights NGOs, or may actively deny it; often this follows from a denial of the abuse in the first place. States rarely have a self-interest in publicising changes brought about by human rights groups (since they were normally secured despite, and not because of, political will). On the contrary, in the development and humanitarian fields, it can often be in the interest of governments – since they want to maintain the funding and practical support of such groups in concrete projects – to share the credit with others for positive outcomes.

Thirdly, it is clear that human rights work, especially advocacy, follows an often long and unpredictable path with many setbacks, as well as (hopefully) ‘champagne moments’. Human rights change is aimed at challenging and sometimes overturning current power relationships and therefore indicators need to be long-term and qualitative. Development change cannot be assessed with solely quantitative data, but such data is valuable. The number of people vaccinated, the levels of infant mortality, the number of children attending school, all give important insights into the effectiveness of monies spent on development. In the context of human rights advocacy however, the indicators need to be much more complex so that they can parse the political rhetoric, and determine the genuine extent of political will which alone will ensure that any change for the better is indeed long-lasting. As one author comments: “[o]bserving the number of individuals trained, the number of individuals with piped water systems, or attendance at a workshop is relatively straightforward ... monitoring advocacy-based projects and their impact on human rights is not.”<sup>19</sup>

When human rights work aims at changes in domestic law and/or policy, which are subject to the exigencies of the political process (especially changes in governments), impacts are particularly difficult to predict or plan for. “Changing the law is a fundamentally political activity,” said one participant, and it is in the nature of politics to shift, change and behave in unpredictable and nonlinear fashions. Advocacy efforts to change policy can take decades to come to fruition: one participant noted that the freedom of information law in Nigeria, recently passed, was the product of 20 years of advocacy

work. Teles and Schmitt<sup>20</sup> argue that advocacy work is at a disadvantage because it is difficult to measure using short-term indicators and is highly sensitive to external pressures and influences, such as international political situations or the economic climate. In planning a project, it would be challenging, if not impossible, to take such events into account, let alone predict them as a results-based framework may demand.<sup>21</sup>

The chaotic, nonlinear nature of the evolution of policy agendas means that often, very little will seem to be happening. As Verta Taylor points out in her study of the women’s movement, “a cause can remain in ‘abeyance’ for decades, but if the fires are kept burning, it’s possible to get things moving when conditions become more permissive.”<sup>22</sup> It is, however, nearly impossible to measure how much longer change would have taken had those fires not been kept burning in the intervening period and if human rights advocates were not ready and capable of exploiting the political opportunities when they eventually arise.

Fourthly, ‘keeping the fire burning’ perhaps best describes some of the most dogged human rights work that may seem to be going nowhere, such as working for decades on disappeared people, or a new treaty, or campaigning against the death penalty. In some cases, “just making the claim” in steadily more assertive ways over a long period could be seen as a valid goal. For example, although the campaign for comprehensive immigration reform in the United States has been a failure in terms of its ultimate goal, it has resulted in an incredibly vibrant organised community of migrants claiming their rights. Whilst no one probably set out this objective as such at the outset of the work, in retrospect it is an extremely important achievement. Strict evaluation practice might require that such unintended ‘by-products’ be discounted, since they were not clearly defined in advance as objectives to be secured. Moreover,

20 Teles and Schmitt, “The Elusive Craft of Evaluating Advocacy”, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2011, p. 39. Available at: [www.ssireview.org/images/digital\\_edition/2011SU\\_Feature\\_TelesSchmitt.pdf](http://www.ssireview.org/images/digital_edition/2011SU_Feature_TelesSchmitt.pdf).

21 Take, for example, healthcare reform in the United States. The eventual legislation of 2010 was prefaced by decades of work by a number of organisations. However, it would be difficult to accurately demonstrate causality since the factors involved in such change were chaotic, numerous and random at times. Teles and Schmitt compare the eventual success of this campaign for healthcare reform with that for action on climate change, which has not been ‘successful’, but reject the conclusion that healthcare reform advocacy was thus better than that around global warming. Instead, they describe these situations as most probably a result of many factors including “dumb luck”. (Teles and Schmitt, 2011, p. 40.)

22 Verta Taylor, “Social Movement Continuity: The Women’s Movement in Abeyance,” *American Sociological Review*, 1989, pp. 761–775.

19 Cited in Gready, 2009, p. 398.

human rights advocates may consider it wrong, or fear that it looks defensive or misguided, to claim credit for such achievements, despite their importance. Ironically, the long-term advantage of creating a cohesive and vibrant community or movement, with a shared purpose, may prove to be much more “impactful” (in terms of public education, rendering the cause visible and mobilising new change agents) than a one-off legal change, but how could that be assessed?

Fifthly, there is the question of changes and developments that are not always visible or even easy to shed a public spotlight on. For example, in certain contexts it may be imprudent for an organisation to publicly lay claim to certain activities let alone their impacts. A number of participants noted that on many occasions they had been unable to publicise, sometimes even to donors, a certain impact because it would have endangered a specific individual or a group. Indeed, tactically, human rights advocates often encourage others to claim primary credit for changes secured, since this ‘co-opts’ others into the process of ownership and may prove useful in fully embedding change.

Another related dimension highlighted was the near-impossibility of accurately measuring changes in human rights-violating activities that are by definition clandestine, such as torture. In such contexts it is important to note that human rights work is sometimes directed not at change, but at preventing negative developments. One participant pointed out that the same could be said for conflict prevention or climate change work. Nevertheless, there was general agreement that this kind of work was difficult to measure or demonstrate as successful, inevitably involving complex counterfactual scenarios, which by their nature are impossible to put beyond question or doubt.

The context in which human rights organisations work can sometimes compel them to adopt ways of working that may not necessarily reflect human rights principles or ‘tick the right boxes’ for assessors. For instance, external observers may want to measure the effectiveness of human rights organisations according to their ability to mobilise a broad-based membership or to secure good media coverage. However, one participant stated from experience that such tactics could be counter-productive in, for example, the context of a long-running violent sectarian conflict.

Finally, it may be relevant that development work, unlike human rights work, generally focuses on ‘developing’ countries: while some poverty alleviation and relief work also takes place in the global North, many more resources are channelled to aid for the Global South. This North–South/developing–developed divide has no relevance at all for human rights: the worst violators of human rights can be the wealthiest countries

economically. Many human rights organisations therefore focus (at least part of) their work on developed nations, although there is increasing pressure from many donors to focus on countries eligible for Official Development Assistance.

All said and done, the ‘exceptionalism’ of human rights work should not be exaggerated. For example, human rights activists can be service providers as well as advocates and sometimes work promoting socio-economic well-being by human rights and by development groups is not easily distinguishable. There is much evaluation experience and practice to be exchanged across different disciplines; nevertheless it was felt that evaluation practices must also be sensitive to potential particularities and divergences.

#### **4. MICRO AND MACRO NARRATIVES OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE**

More than a decade ago, Amartya Sen identified the paradox of micro successes and macro failures in the context of poverty alleviation.<sup>23</sup> Since then, this gulf has been increasingly recognised as a significant concern and considerable efforts have been made to better comprehend the nature of this disjuncture and how it might be overcome, at least in the context of development and poverty alleviation.<sup>24</sup>

Micro and macro have to be understood not in the usual sense of levels of intervention such as, for example, grassroots work (micro) and policy research (macro), but rather as poles within the same broader evaluative frame. This includes, for example: a specific project vis-a-vis the wider work of the organisation; the change objectives of a project cycle vis-a-vis the broader change dynamics; a particular organisation vis-a-vis the wider community/movement it is part of; and, in the case of donors, a specific grant vis-a-vis the wider portfolio. As highlighted often in discussions at the workshop, the disjoint between the macro and micro level in human rights and development work leaves gaps which risk leaving real and sustained social change out of reach.

Across these evaluative frames, there is a tendency to focus on the micro because it is usually the pole that is more comprehensible and easier to subject to measurement. This is connected to a phenomenon referred to by one participant as “the relentless generation of micro-

23 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

24 See, e.g., “Assessing Linkages between Micro and Macro Level Issues Meeting”, 2002, *UNDP Evaluation Office*, available at [www.undp.org/evaluation/documents/micro-macroLinkages-workshop-report.pdf](http://www.undp.org/evaluation/documents/micro-macroLinkages-workshop-report.pdf) and “Moving Out Poverty: Understanding Freedom, Democracy and Growth from the Bottom Up”, PREM, *World Bank*, 2007, available at [siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMOVOUTPOV/Resources/2104215-1187710751691/Bangladesh\\_NSR\\_Final\\_Draft.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMOVOUTPOV/Resources/2104215-1187710751691/Bangladesh_NSR_Final_Draft.pdf).

narratives of success". Driving this, arguably, is the use of standardised reporting formats that focus on measurable indicators rather than longer term processes of social and political change, rendering donors and NGOs complicit in the co-construction of narratives of success.<sup>25</sup> This quashes creativity and discourages a constructive engagement with failure, which negatively impacts on organisational learning. (Discussed, below on [page 13](#).) The requirements of donors, who often insist on short project cycles and rapid impact, influence how NGOs approach notions of success and failure within the micro and macro frames. There is a notable trend amongst NGOs to package or reformulate their macro agendas in the form of small-scale interventions, benchmarks or goals, attempting to demonstrate the linear, attributive, predictable and short-term results for projects more suited to broader and longer term macro level intervention.

The micro-success/macro-failures syndrome has major implications and raises a number of serious questions that merit attention in the context of evaluating human rights work. The tension between a particular project or a specific project cycle and the wider or longer term work of an organisation is a good example. Sustained long-term work and investment is often needed to redress deep-rooted systemic or structural human rights concerns, such as discrimination, for example. Yet project cycles are short-term, typically of 2–4 years. Is this encouraging organisations to "pick low hanging fruit", i.e. projects which can be more easily measured and demonstrated as successful? Are fewer organisations choosing 'riskier' projects or approaches with longer-term time horizons? More importantly, to what extent is the success or failure of a particular project linked to the wider work or mission of an organisation in the long run?<sup>26</sup> Organisations may limit themselves,

planning for advocacy "in terms of a well-marked path to success" and specific timescales of change in order to secure funding. Teles and Schmitt note that such logic may be harmful and prove regressive to bold advocacy efforts, allowing the opposition to adapt and regroup or for less ambitious goals to be set and accepted.

Donors and evaluators should bear in mind these gulfs between micro- and macro-frames when assessing the 'success' or 'failure' of a project or organisation, as external timetables and pressures contribute significantly to the increased tendency for human rights work to operate within micro frames, less risky and with a higher possibility of clear results. The disjuncture also applies at the level of specific grant units (project or organisational) versus the wider portfolio (thematic or organisational). To what extent should donor organisations concentrate on evaluating impacts of grants made to specific organisations or specific projects? Should such a focus be tempered or shaped by the assessment of wider grant portfolios at a wider thematic or multi-organisational level? If so, how? Alternatively, is the move by some donors to concentrate on long-term core support for individuals and organisations with a proven track record a more appropriate path? This approach does not minimise the need for accountability from grantees, but allows them more flexibility (and financial security) as they develop reporting mechanisms which benefit both donors and grantees and therefore, the work as a whole.

An awareness of this issue is also critical to human rights practice. It calls for human rights organisations to examine internal approaches and visions of their own effectiveness in the light of the micro-macro tensions. Clearly, the task of accounting for the macro in evaluation poses a wide range of challenges, but that does not make an approach that privileges the micro any better.

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25 Alnoor Ebrahim, *NGOs and Organizational Change: Discourse, Reporting and Learning*, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

26 For example, work on a particular death row case versus an organisational mission to abolish the death penalty worldwide.

## PART II: WAYS FORWARD?

### 1. SHIFTING THE FRAMES OF EVALUATION

'Shifting the frames' entails a call to assessors to focus evaluation of human rights work not on individual grants or projects but the wider grant portfolio, over a reasonable length of time. Such a shift only reflects the reality that individual projects or even organisations rarely achieve change alone, but rather truly significant change is usually due to the combined efforts of many. Moreover, the very idea of 'failure' is questionable, since some approaches, organisations and projects need to 'fail' if others are to learn the lessons thereby created and be deemed 'successful'.

Pre-determined paths do not allow for changing circumstances, whereas successful advocacy efforts depend on an ability to adapt to change. In this context, Teles and Schmitt suggest that funders "take chances on big efforts to change policy and public assumptions, rather than retreating to the safer space of incremental change".<sup>27</sup>

Another important corresponding shift is to focus evaluation not on the specific advocacy initiatives but instead on deeper attributes within the organisation that can enable it to straddle the uncertainties as well as leverage the opening of unexpected opportunities effectively. Consequently, Teles and Schmitt argue that the proper focus for evaluation is not particular acts of advocacy but rather the "long-term adaptability, strategic capacity", as well as creativity, tactical agility and "ultimately influence of organisations themselves."<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Ebrahim and Rangan suggest that performance in advocacy and rights-based work cannot easily demonstrate impact, and thus can be measured most effectively in terms of outputs and "influence" in shaping key policies, rights and freedoms ("intermediate outcomes"), rather than impacts. In fact, of the four categories of intervention they identify, only service delivery

activities can readily be measured in terms of impact.<sup>29</sup> "Efforts to influence public policy, however, are typically more complex, and they are shaped by many factors which may be poorly understood and nonlinear. In such contexts, it is hard to know how much of a difference a particular intervention makes", especially as they involve "constellations of many actors".<sup>30</sup> Ebrahim and Rangan thus identify an organisation's theory of change as a key factor in its ability to demonstrate causality and impacts. Advocacy organisations generally have more complex theories of change (than, for example, service providers or humanitarian relief agencies) that do not necessarily follow a linear logic. Coupled with their relative lack of control over outcomes, this means they are unlikely to be able to demonstrate a causal link between their work and results.<sup>31</sup>

In light of these insights, it seems desirable that those who commission evaluations, whether funders or grantees, work towards more holistic and flexible evaluation methodologies and frameworks for human rights work (especially that related to policy, research and advocacy), with longer-term horizons and more focus on the institutional, strategic capacity of organisations and their influence. Participants at the workshop queried the current excessive emphasis on supposedly "scientific" approaches and called for evaluation frameworks that give greater recognition of the subjective world of politics in which human rights change takes place. Moreover, several participants referred to the importance of viewing evaluation not as a single event but as an ongoing process of reflection.

27 Teles and Schmitt, 2011, p. 40.

28 Ibid, p. 42.

29 Ebrahim and Rangan, "The Limits of Nonprofit Impact: A Contingency Framework for Measuring Social Performance", Harvard Business School Working Paper 10-099, 2010, pp. 22–27. Available at: [www.hbs.edu/research/pdf/10-099.pdf](http://www.hbs.edu/research/pdf/10-099.pdf).

30 Ibid, p. 23.

31 Ibid, p. 27.

**Box 3: *How Things Work* – an International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) initiative in evaluation research to describe the space between ‘inputs’ and ‘outputs’ in justice interventions**

*Pablo de Greiff, ICTJ*

*How Things Work* is meant to contribute to discussions about impact, by taking a step that should precede evaluation, namely, understanding precisely how interventions in the area of justice work. In the absence of clarity regarding what makes it reasonable to assume that if a certain measure is implemented certain consequences will follow, the great rush to adopt results-based approaches and to understand programmes primarily through the prism of ‘impact’ seems, well, rushed.

Practitioners, anthropologists, historians, and other academics have provided rich and fine-grained descriptions of particular cases, while sociologists and political scientists, in particular, have offered a different type of description, concentrating on correlations between interventions and ‘results’. On the other hand, human rights activists and scholars, amongst others, have engaged in sometimes sophisticated debates that seek to strengthen the various justifications of undertaking transitional justice interventions. *How Things Work* is intended to occupy a space between descriptivism (an account of how particular interventions have worked) on the one hand and normativism (a justificatory account of transitional justice interventions) on the other, by constructing ‘reasonable accounts’ of how interventions can bring about the effects that are often attributed to them.

To this end, a group composed of prominent practitioners and scholars in equal measure were invited to participate in this project, receiving exactly the same assignment: to construct, initially, three different detailed accounts that might provide an explanation of the ‘results’ of transitional justice interventions. ‘Providing an explanation’ consisted of reconstructing the causal pathways that could lead from the intervention (input) to its outcomes (output).

The project, now in its final stages, has led to the following insights:

- Monocausal accounts of the relationship between justice interventions and the ends frequently attributed to them are likely to rest on over-simplification.
- The very same interventions can serve various goals at the same time; but neither the goals nor the relationship between interventions and measures are of a kind. In particular, it is important to distinguish between ‘immediate’, ‘mediate’, and ‘final’ goals of interventions; the point is not only about temporal proximity (or remoteness) but causal sufficiency (or insufficiency). There are goals that can be brought about through single interventions (and rapidly, to boot), and others that cannot plausibly be brought about through the implementation of a single type of measure, not even in the long run.
- There is a trade-off between which types of goals to focus on for purposes of assessments. Effectiveness is more easily assessed by reference to more immediate goals but ignoring mediate and more ‘final’ goals deprives policy design and choice from an important source of guidance and critique. Ultimately, this choice imperils the normative leverage which could explain why justice sector work is important in the first place. Current approaches also create a counter-incentive for policy integration, catalysing competition and short-termism rather than cooperation and coherence.
- The current rush in favour of results-based approaches sends strong (and therefore all other things being equal probably costly) signals in favour of assessing the success and failure of interventions only by reference to the attainment of their more proximate goals.
- The two primary ‘social mechanisms’ that can be used in order to explain the way justice interventions work are norm affirmation, and the capacity of these measures to articulate and disarticulate social groups. There are reasons to think that designing and implementing programmes having these mechanisms in mind may increase their effectiveness.
- *How Things Work* underlines the immense importance of a phase of enquiry that ought to precede discussions about impact and evaluation. However, such foundational work, which analyses the process of hypothesis formation is distinctly lacking. While no one should assume that justice related programming should be exempt from evaluation, in the absence of clearer accounts of how such programmes work the use of present ‘measurement’ techniques as a criterion for investment decisions in this sphere should itself be open to question.

## 2. “FROM JUDGEMENT TO LEARNING”

Ultimately the purpose of all evaluations is to help individuals and organisations learn not only from successes and failures but also from the process of measuring and assessing them meaningfully. The challenges that human rights organisations face with respect to learning are often similar to those faced in other fields, although there are some distinctions. Some of the most salient challenges include:

- a) The fact that human rights work is generally driven by a moral imperative and its foundations are universal norms may pose a barrier to learning or insulate the work from open criticism, in that practitioners may justify their actions (to themselves and/or to others) as simply ‘the right thing to do’.
- b) The flip side of a tendency to generate ‘micro-narratives of success’ (see above) may lie in a reduced ability to engage honestly with failure. The fear of a loss of credibility, especially in a context where human rights organisations are subjecting other state and non-state actors to criticism for their failures, can further aggravate this tendency and pose a significant barrier to learning. Where there is a competitive funding environment, the risks posed by concealing error as opposed to celebrating learning are all the greater.
- c) Evaluation processes themselves may be a block. When evaluations are seen as externally imposed, solely fulfilling commitments made to donors, conducted in non-participatory ways or impose excessive burdens on staff then they can be counter-productive, demotivating and are highly unlikely to facilitate learning. The last point is especially salient because evaluations are often an addition to primary responsibilities carried by staff. In a similar vein, if evaluations are seen as a proxy for (or dovetailed inappropriately with) personal performance assessments, it can obstruct learning. Evaluations have, on occasion, been commissioned to address “hidden” organisational agendas (to justify closure of particular programmes or posts; or to clandestinely look at systemic problems) and it is self-evident that, once detected, such an approach is unlikely to foster honesty or trust and therefore will be counter-productive.

One of the key messages for consideration from the workshop was that embedding learning requires a shift from a focus on evaluation or audit to “evaluative thinking”, an approach characterised by an action-reflection-learning chain that is continuous and integrated into the organisation’s culture. Such a shift requires a political commitment; creating a learning environment requires both institutional structures and spaces, and also political legitimacy

within an organisation.

When evaluations are perceived mainly as tools for vertical accountability (to external donors or internal management), which can often be the case, this reduces opportunities for learning. This is not only as a result of problems already identified, but also because a duty to learn or enable learning is not seen as part of the accountability discussion. Reconciling this unhelpful perception of dichotomy is paramount. Any worthwhile definition of accountability should explicitly embrace learning: an accountable organisation is one that learns and improves as a result.<sup>32</sup> Reframing the ‘evaluation’ paradigm in this way may help its perceived relevance to learning in general and to human rights work in particular.

Viewing evaluations as learning opportunities and spaces is critical but as was observed, currently most “interesting learning opportunities are farmed out to external consultants”. This not only reduces the overall learning quotient within the organisation but also builds barriers to evaluations themselves. The idea of expanding in-house evaluations through internal consultancies is an important suggestion that merits serious consideration. Such opportunities could contribute to expanding cumulative learning within the organisation, embedding a learning-orientation as well as expanding capacities.

Bridging individual and organisational learning is also critical. Evaluations by themselves will not result in such bridging unless special efforts are made. Institutionalising lessons and insights gathered by individuals, and creating and sharing institutional memories of lessons learnt with individuals are significant challenges. Meeting them requires creating and legitimising time spent in learning processes, including lending the political weight needed. It may be helpful to ask individuals to think about three different levels of responses to evaluations: the first concerned with the wider policies and structures of the organisation; the second related to the specific processes already in place which need to take the findings into account; and, the third related to what individuals can do as part of exercising their own agency.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, different organisations face different challenges in this respect, particularly in terms of their relative size. Larger ones may find it much harder to ‘learn’ at an organisational level than a small, more internally flexible advocacy group. However, there are some core issues that all organisations should consider. As was noted, “one must examine where learning sits in an organisation’s strategy, what is its relationship with governance, and what resources are dedicated to it?”

32 Zaira Drammis, (Amnesty International), Reflection paper for ICHRP workshop.

33 Zaira Drammis (Amnesty International) Reflection paper for ICHRP workshop.

Consistency can be vital to ensure opportunity for learning is created and maintained through structures and processes that encourage exchange through narration, listening, reading and recording. However, structures and processes can calcify, becoming routine and predictable and thus hinder learning. Some argued that a “learning system” is an oxymoron, as transformative learning happens when our usual assumptions and patterns are shaken. “Disruptive learning” (i.e., using facilitated but varied learning events and spaces), was offered as a useful antidote.

One participant pointed out that it is important to recognise different types of learning, for example: compliance learning, resistance learning and transformative learning, with the latter not happening enough. Compliance learning has come to predominate: the more systems of compliance are imposed, the better people become at getting round this - or complying mechanically. An employee of a human rights organisation might learn how to create a log frame, because it is necessary in order secure funding – but this is not in itself likely to be real, transformative learning. A true learning environment may encourage individuals to assume risks with greater confidence, a critical issue when it comes to human rights work, which often follows unpredictable trajectories.

A key element in moving from “judgement” to “learning” is the creation and maintenance of trust amongst all the various parties concerned. The process itself needs to be open and frank; mistakes must be openly acknowledged. Yet, this kind of honest dialogue will only occur if there is adequate transparency and participation, and if all involved are seen to share the same overall goals. Of course, honest dialogue can be particularly challenging given the nature of relations between funders and grantees.

### 3. PEER REVIEW AND EVALUATION

An increasing number of concerns surround the burgeoning evaluation industry and the politics of professional evaluators. In such a context, complementing calls for enhancing learning through internal evaluation and reflection through peer review/assessment/evaluation-based learning merits closer examination. Such methods are used widely in the social sciences but also in many prominent public spheres such as the African Peer Review Mechanism within New Partnership for Africa’s Development; the Trade Policy Review in the World Trade Organisation and also within the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.<sup>34</sup> The

34 See, e.g., The African Peer Review Mechanism: Process and procedures, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and also Peer Review as a Tool for Co-Operation and Change: An analysis of an OECD working method, Fabricio Pagani, both in *African Security Review*, Vol. 11 No 4, 2002. Available at: [www.iss.co.za/pubs/asr/11no4/Feature1.html](http://www.iss.co.za/pubs/asr/11no4/Feature1.html).

Universal Periodic Review of UN Human Rights Council is also a peer review mechanism.

In a manner of speaking, external evaluators of human rights organisations may also be ‘peers’, to the extent of their association and involvement, previous or concurrent, within the broader human rights movement. As was pointed out by more than one participant at the workshop, a history of active involvement in human rights work often helps to render evaluations more useful and evaluators themselves more credible. In addition, measures such as the Grantee Perception Index,<sup>35</sup> for example, also approximate some form of peer assessment. The idea of formal, institutionalised peer review/evaluation-based learning however takes this a logical step forward.

In a context that is marked by a blend of competitiveness and cooperation, discussion on the peer evaluation approach underlined the potential as well as challenges. A peer evaluation, whereby staff from one or more organisations undertook a review of another could ensure better understanding of the issues, build solidarity and mutual capacities, and foster mutual learning within both organisations. The affinities developed and discovered through shared issues and concerns could build a platform that would benefit the human rights community as a whole. The level of trust and solidarity could in fact encourage greater honesty and openness.

On the other hand, many challenges were also outlined. A first step to effective peer review is meaningful institutionalisation of the principles of mutual learning and horizontal accountability *within* the organisations concerned i.e. amongst staff internally. Active and intense facilitation is a prerequisite, both to build trust as well as to generate a credible process and establish clear and effective ground rules, including around issues like confidentiality. Tensions could also emerge from the fact that different organisations value, prioritise and choose different action and learning methods or models. The fact of being peers many also render issues of self-censorship, on the part of both sides, fairly significant.

A question of wider relevance that arose was who exactly is included in the category of ‘peer’. Are donors included? What about other actors? Some felt that donors could play a productive role in the peer group process, while others felt that power dynamics would create problems. “Getting the right people together” was underlined as key – in other words, the importance of paying attention to affinities – in terms of geo-political context, issue focus, approach and expertise etc. – in the selection of peers. The relevance of context and affinities also poses challenges; for instance, while an appreciation of the local context and understanding is important, a

35 The Center for Effective Philanthropy, [www.effectivephilanthropy.org/index.php?page=grantee-perception-report](http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/index.php?page=grantee-perception-report).

perspective from a distance may also help; for example, a peer review of a Geneva-based human rights organisation working at the level of UN advocacy could benefit from involvement by an organisation in the field.

Another significant question is setting the aims of a peer-led review. Should it focus on the question of effectiveness and impact as such, or is it more relevant to conceive of it as a 'peer-to-peer learning process', one focused on looking inward towards internal processes rather than external impacts? Indeed both could be achieved, subject to the design of the process and the methodology. The extent to which such processes could fulfil donor evaluation requirements is also unclear. Could donors be engaged in facilitating such peer-to-peer processes? If so, how may this influence the process and outcomes? Despite

the many questions, there was widespread agreement that this is an idea that merits further exploration, including support from donors for pilot peer reviews and learning initiatives, which would enable lessons to be learnt.

Finally, it is worth stressing that in reality there is a lot of 'informal' peer evaluation already taking place. These range from back-room conversations about other organisations; responses to requests from donors or other actors for feedback concerning other organisations; shared reflection at the level of individual staff across organisations; and more formal feedback on reports or projects. Giving a more definitive institutional character to this, although not without its challenges, may go a long way in enhancing horizontal accountabilities as well as potentially change the discourse around evaluation for the better.

#### **Box 4: Peer Review of Transitional Justice Initiatives in Africa: Removing Adversity from Evaluation**

*Colleen Duggan, International Development Research Centre (IDRC)*

In 2007 the African Transitional Justice Researchers Network (ATJRN) requested the support of the International Development Research Centre to help in an exploration of evaluation approaches that would be appropriate for assessing transitional justice initiatives. The initiative was motivated by several factors, including a Network frustration with dominant donor approaches to evaluation which members perceived to be top down, punitive and unhelpful in illuminating larger goals such as how transitional justice contributes to durable peace.

Network members singled out a process of rotational self-evaluation between professional peers as a collaborative learning approach that would allow constructive critical reflection and strengthen network relationships, while surfacing assumptions underpinning project work and uncovering theories of change, something that tends to be particularly elusive in the field of transitional justice. The peer review approach brings together organisations with comparable levels of expertise and working in similar focus areas or contexts. To structure the review in a balanced and even-handed manner, participants jointly develop terms of reference that set out (1) the objectives, scope and intended results of the review; (2) the roles and responsibilities of the review team and of the organisation under review; and (3) the timeline and human and financial resources required for the exercise. The review framework includes:

- *Ex ante* study by the reviewers of documents relating to the mandate, structure, partnerships and programmes of the organisation under review;
- A self-assessment report undertaken by the organisation under review;
- An in-country assessment by the reviewers including interviews with staff, external partners and other stakeholders;
- A de-brief between the reviewers and the organisation being reviewed, prior to departure;
- Production of two reports: A confidential report to be reviewed exclusively by review participants and a second report detailing general aspects of the peer review process and suggestions for its improvement.

Conducted in Kenya and Sierra Leone, members highlighted a number of strengths and benefits of the methodology. They noted that having a respected peer offer an impartial assessment helped to depersonalise and depoliticise difficult issues, making it easier for the organisation under review to confront and address them objectively. Similarly, the existence of a well-established prior relationship, shared values between the reviewing organisation and the organisation under review and the confidential nature of the methodology were critical for ensuring a successful experience.

Sources:

*International Journal of Transitional Justice*. Vol.4 Issue 3. November 2010: Colleen Duggan, Editorial Note, pp. 315–328.  
Nokukhanya Mncwabe, *African Transitional Justice Research Network: Critical Reflections on a Peer Learning Process*, pp. 497–508.

## CONCLUSION

This report has canvassed a number of different concerns regarding approaches to 'evaluation' or 'impact assessment' of human rights work, as well as possible ways forward to rethink and redefine current practice. A serious consideration of the problems and ideas raised at the workshop would constitute an important step towards strengthening human rights work and the accountability of all involved in it – advocates, donors and evaluators alike.

One of the most prominent threads running through the discussions at the workshop was the tendency to over-privilege the application of metrics and positivist methods to complex and elusive processes of change. As one participant noted, approaching evaluation as a science rather than an art could lead to an over-reliance on "algorithms" at the expense of "nose", contextual judgement or instinct.

The dangers of this are tellingly illustrated in an anecdote shared with ICHRP regarding an evaluation of a programme on women's rights and empowerment in rural India. Evaluators were hard-pressed to find data for the various indicators

they had developed to show any significant positive change in women's lives as a result of the intervention. Then, in the course of an interview, one of the women associated with the organisation said that previously whenever the local landlord addressed her, she had always answered with her eyes on the ground; now, she responded with her gaze on the top button of his shirt, and expressed the hope that one day she would be able to look him in the eye and reply.<sup>36</sup> Undoubtedly, ensuring that evaluation and assessment of human rights work can account for such subtle realities of change presents a huge challenge to human rights organisations, donors and evaluators alike. It is however imperative that every attempt is made to grapple honestly with the complexities of the challenge, compelling as the temptation may be to resort to quick fixes and expert-led solutions; at stake is the heart and soul of human rights work.

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<sup>36</sup> Srilatha Batiwala, AWID Scholar Associate, personal communication to ICHRP, 2011.

## **ANNEX: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

Magda Ali, *Board Member, ICHRP*

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Is the emphasis on a results-based culture and value for money having a disproportionate impact on the work of human rights organisations? How do evaluation and impact assessment practices shape priorities, objectives and processes in human rights work? Are human rights organisations being discouraged from taking risks and pursuing long-term agendas in favour of projects that are easier to measure and 'prove' as successful? **No Perfect Measure** focuses on the political and normative issues underlying these questions and concerns.

Drawing on discussions at a workshop involving advocates, donors, social scientists and evaluators, this report is a continuation of the ICHRP's work towards facilitating critical reflection on redefining approaches to evaluating and assessing human rights work. Examining questions of power and accountability, the particularities of human rights work, the tensions between micro and macro narratives and other issues, the report also points to approaches that widen the frames of evaluation and assessment and place a greater emphasis on learning rather than judgement, including ideas such as peer review.

