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## Report on the Workshop Self Assessment

*November 20, 2003 during the PSO Conference South Central! in The Hague, The Netherlands*

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**In this report on the workshop on self assessment, an abbreviated version of the two cases will be presented, after which an overview of the discussion is given, structured on the 3 leading questions posed.**

The workshop was chaired by **Naa-Aku Acquaye-Baddoo** of SNV Netherlands Development Organisation. Naa-Aku is a senior advisor in the HR&O unit of SNV. Specifically, she is a project leader for a corporate advisory practice and organisational learning project. Naa-Aku has overall responsibility for corporate training on Advisory Practice in SNV. She used to work for SNV in Ghana, but has recently moved to The Netherlands.

### CASE STUDY 1

Judith Chaumba and Jouwert van Geene presented their case of the NANGO Capacity Building Program. Judith works as a training officer of NANGO and is coordinating the capacity building program. Jouwert is working as an independent consultant to NANGO giving technical assistance (via ICCO) to the program.

NANGO is the recognised National Association of NGOs in Zimbabwe and used to be involved mainly in training of NGOs. In 2002 NANGO shifted its focus to capacity building in a broader sense, not only training of staff but focusing also on organisational and institutional development. In the start phase of its Capacity Building Program NANGO invited ten NGOs involved with gender issues to participate in this capacity building process. NANGO had already established a working relationship with these NGOs through earlier training activities and NGOs had shown interest in capacity building. Most organisations are relatively small and community based.

Objectives of the program were to strengthen, mobilise and enhance the capacity of NGO personnel and strengthen the overall organisational effectiveness of NGOs. Further more NANGO should be enabled to carry out capacity assessments without assistance in the future.

The process of participatory capacity building (PCB) was shortly explained. PCB is a spin off of the UNDP assessment tool named POET, which was developed in 1998 and has been tested in many different countries. PCB follows four steps:

1. A self assessment for all NGOs (on 7 capacity areas, using the critical incident method, leading to a capacity scoring and a scoring of the consensus on these capacity scores)
2. Feedback and capacity planning (envisioning future capacity based on analysed assessment results and challenging blocks that stop the organisation from moving towards this vision)
3. Operational planning and co-ordination (at NGO level and at cohort level)
4. Monitoring and evaluation

(see also the toolbox on the PCB website ([www.geocities.com/part\\_cap\\_building](http://www.geocities.com/part_cap_building)) for further details).

## CASE STUDY 2

Talent Nyathi presented the second case on Community Publishing and Self Assessment Experience. Community Publishing is a development initiative that is influenced by Paul Freire's theories of starting with what people know and together with them explore the unknown. This is a process that enables people to reawaken the conscious mind rediscovering their potentials and actualising them to the maximum. It is a people driven process in its design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Its roots lie in the government of Zimbabwe where it was initiated during the early years of independence, with special focus on producing new development manuals for the training of village community workers, a multi purpose cadre who was based in the village. For nine years Community Publishing worked with the government to publish more than five development manuals covering a wide range of topics from development, gender, political pluralism to mention but a few. Demand for its services grew beyond the borders of the Ministry of Community Development where it was placed to other Ministries and development organizations. Community Publishing started working on sensitive issues of governance with the people, at the point which the government decided the work was subversive and instructed that it should be stopped. It was at this point that Community Publishing left the government and was registered as a charitable organisation in Zimbabwe.

Having presented this short background Talent moved to the subject of experience with Self Assessment. For ACPD self assessment is a continuous built in process in all programmes. ACPD designs programmes that require periodic reflection on how things are going what needs to be done? ACPD has experience that programmes are dead without this aspect included.

Self Assessment can be misleading if people decide not to be honest with themselves and each other. It can be a very painful exercise when people are open and honest with themselves. The first time we tried it as managers it was shocking to realize that as manager maybe we were not performing at the best of our ability and it was painful to say that to the other managers, words almost refusing to come out to admit faults.

At local level the exercises sometimes caused tensions amongst the participants especially when they looked at each other's weaknesses "*some of you have been using us as ladders for your success and now you accuse us of not performing*" "*Aha! If you get used as a ladder that means you were lying idle decided not to perform until others saw that you could be useful for their progress*" It was a heated debate at a self assessment workshop in one of the communities we work with.

Several aspects turned out to be major learning points: Self Assessment is an on going process; It is about honesty, openness with oneself or as an organisation; Others may assist but the best lies within yourself; You can not design a Self Assessment tool for another organisation. A Self Assessment tool that works is the one that you develop together and it is important for me to mention that it is a process and should continue to evolve responding to the environment and growth of the organisation.

Self Assessment should not be subject to availability of funding or renewal of partnership contracts because in this case it is likely to be biased towards the one with resources. Hiring somebody to carry out a Self Assessment exercise may not produce the required results as the other person is likely to express her /his opinion about the organisation. The only way to use an external person in our experience is to use someone

as a facilitator of the process because they will help you look at other areas that you may have neglected as an organisation.

At ACPD Self Assessment is on built exercise; it is part of the programme process, it starts at community level where programmes are implemented to the national level, then once every year everybody comes together to look at things.

We are currently under a process of working with NiZA to do a thorough Self Assessment of the organisation. Already, positive signs are beginning to show, because it was after our first workshop that we designed a long term capacity building programme.

## **DISCUSSION**

**After these introductions of the different cases and tools the discussion was structured following three leading questions.**

### ***1. How to make self assessment a truly locally owned process?***

In the NANGO case the self assessment process involves scoring on very many questions. It could be asked if such a scoring really adds to the insight people have in their own organisation. This tool remains a pre-designed tool, designed in a different setting not fitting automatically with every situation. The question was asked if such a tool does not suffer too much from a cultural bias. Can such an instrument really be locally owned? Is it not preferable to develop tools from the inside of an organisation to make them really locally owned?

The case owners shared their experiences in this with the other workshop participants. First of all it turned out that it is very important to prepare an organisation for an organisational assessment. It should be clear to everybody what is expected from him/her and what the possible consequences could be. In some cases a discussion on capacity building in general was needed before proceeding with the assessment.

In the case of ACPD self assessment is in itself not new too village groups, they already use tools to assess their functioning and situation. Offering external tools can help to deepen the understanding. Internal strive for continuous growth need to exist. Also in the case of NANGO a relationship was already established with the NGOs before the assessment process was started. NGOs were some way or another familiar with SWOT analysis. The PCB tool offers a way to make the assessment more profound and more structured. Experience has shown that tool adjustments need to be made to make the tool fit to a particular organisation: e.g. posing questions differently, adding categories of subjects if needed. NANGO sees it also as a development process for itself to find out in which ways this tool can be used and adjusted for future use.

### ***2. How to handle differences in perception in a self assessment process? (in a organisation & between partner and donor)?***

The case presenters indicated that mixing up different groups of stakeholders in the process can make the process both more interesting, but also more complicated. In settings were several layers of stakeholders are present, some people will find it hard to open up and share. Discussing functioning of an organisation often also involves discussing functioning of individuals. This can create tensions. Growing may involve having some pain here and there. It is therefore important to have someone present with basic facilitation skills who can facilitate the processes, someone who is sensitive to inter-human tensions. It needs to be a

progressive process and not a punishing one. Common understanding of the problems and possibilities of an organisation is an important expected outcome of an assessment process.

NANGO uses individual scoring, besides critical incident discussions, to make it possible for people to say also anonymously what they feel. Difference in literacy levels plays an important role in this situation, because different people have different understandings of the questions posed.

One of the workshop participants asked if these tools would also be meaningful and useable in situations in which the internal/external context is very threatening / tense and where groups work on a grass root level. Are these tools elastic enough to be adjusted to these situations, or is there a point where there is no more stretching possible? For NANGO this would be a challenge, but experiences are yet quite limited in this respect. In the understanding of ACPD stretching of tools is often very well possible. You don't need to bring a mechanical toolbox in these situation and you need to have a relationship established before starting an assessment process.

Besides internal differences of opinion between different staff members, it is also important to address the difference in perception of understanding of the assessment between the partner and the donor. From their experience the case-owners know that donors tend to want to objectify en quantify as much as possible, where as an organisation for its own growth often prefers more qualitative information. When doing an assessment is mainly inspired by donor preferences, the possibility must not be excluded that partners will stage / twist the assessment process.

A southern consultant suggested that it would be preferable to have a neutral party involved in the self-assessment, to minimize donor as well as partner biases. One of the case-owners questioned this approach as it would take one of the fundamentals out of the self-assessment process: self. It would rather be more interesting to disconnect the assessment from funding decisions, and to let the self assessment mainly have its objective in the growth process of the partner organisation. Possible initial fears will then start to disappear.

### ***3. In which way can self assessment techniques be used for learning and for monitoring organisational development?***

The NANGO case-owners are convinced that learning starts when partners start to think about doing a self assessment, getting used to tools and adjusting tools is also part of this process. The PCB can also be used to monitor and evaluate organisations over time or in comparison to others.

One of the participants to the workshop was of the opinion that maybe we need to differentiate between learning and monitoring. Self assessment can contribute to learning, where an external assessment is more appropriate for monitoring and evaluation, as it involves objective figures and money transfers. Somebody else added that self assessments can be very specific per organisation, but donors need some sort of standardisation in monitoring to be able to aggregate monitoring data also to their back donors.

Self conscious partners should be able to choose donors in stead of the other way around, this would make donors also more conscious on their own functioning and would create some more equity in relationships.