

Core principles for assessing effectiveness: A NGO approach to evidencing change

DRAFT II (revised based on feedback in October 2011)

Bond Effectiveness Programme / PPA Learning Group on measuring empowerment and accountability

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The Bond Effectiveness Programme

The Bond Effectiveness Programme (BEP) is a three year process seeking to support UK NGOs working in international development to strengthen the rigour and consistency with which they measure, learn from and report on their contribution to social development. The Programme has three streams of work:

1. Developing agreement and supporting implementation of a sector wide **framework of indicators, data collection tools and assessment methods** to improve the consistency of how NGOs measure, learn from and communicate results (Im-Prove it! Framework); and an **Online effectiveness self-assessment** and resource portal that enables benchmarking with peers, sign posts to existing tools, and supports improvements in effectiveness systems and capacities
2. Building **knowledge and skills** to support members in measuring and managing effectiveness through training, peer learning and support, piloting, and resource development (e.g. Value for Money)
3. Creating an **enabling environment** that encourages and supports organisations to deliver improvements in their effectiveness through engagement with donors, NGO leaders and promoting greater transparency about performance

If you would like more details on BEP and how to get involved please go to our webpages <http://www.bond.org.uk/pages/bond-effectiveness-programme.html>. Alternatively, contact Rob Lloyd, Effectiveness Programme Manager: rlloyd@bond.org.uk

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1. Introduction

This paper is a contribution to the development of the [Improve it Framework](#). A framework grounded in the **distinctive contributions** that UK NGOs make to international development that will support organisations to **assess, learn from** and **communicate** their effectiveness more **confidently** and **consistently**. The framework will guide organizations, depending on their organisational mandate, 'way(s) of working' and 'thematic areas' of work, in identifying: **what to assess, how to assess and what to communicate**. The framework will provide the sector with a platform for **systematic learning and sharing** on assessing effectiveness; and a **common framework** that organisations can draw on and adapt to their own context.

At the centre of the Improve it Framework is a set of core principles for assessing NGO effectiveness. These represent the foundations of a **NGO approach to assessing effectiveness** that marries credibility and robustness with the realities and values of UK NGOs.

The paper introduces each of the eight draft principles, explores why each is key to a robust assessment of effectiveness and how they interact and support each other, and proposes a set of criteria for putting the principles into practice. Through the principles and criteria we aim to produce a shared reference point for NGOs to check and demonstrate to internal and external audiences that the process through which data has been collected and analysed is high quality and the resulting evidence of change is robust.

This is the second draft of a paper that was first circulated among a small group of Bond members in Sept 2011 and also discussed with members of the PPA Learning Group on measuring empowerment and accountability in March 2012.

2. Why do we need a NGO approach to assessing and evidencing effectiveness?

The Bond Effectiveness Programme seeks to support UK NGOs working in international development to strengthen the rigour and consistency with which they assess and demonstrate their effectiveness. The drivers for this work are two fold. First, to enable organisations to better understand what works and what does not within their own contexts. Second, to enable organisations to tell a more robust story of how aid funds make a difference to the lives of poor and marginalised people – both as individual NGOs and collectively as a sector.

The challenge facing UK NGOs in engaging with the results agenda is in developing approaches and systems for assessing effectiveness which are sufficiently consistent, shared and **rigorous**, but at the same time **cost effective** to implement; **credible** enough to stand up to external scrutiny, but **flexible** enough to be of use to day to day decision making; **sophisticated** enough to reveal key elements of successes and failures, but **accessible** enough for non-M&E specialists to be able to use them in their day to day work; appropriate for supporting **upward reporting**, but effective in supporting the process of **empowering poor women and men**.

Navigating these competing issues lies at the heart of how UK NGOs can improve how they assess and demonstrate their effectiveness. How this is achieved will vary from organisation to organisation depending on the type of work, how the organisation operates, and the resources it has available. We need to recognise that the realities of NGO interventions are often very different to those of other development actors such as DFID. NGOs have more limited resources, their work is smaller-scale and their theories and

strategies for change are often different. Values are also key. **It is a core belief among UK NGOs that the process of assessing change should be empowering to those involved.** It should involve and be owned by the poor men and women and Southern NGOs that are implementing an intervention. The process of assessing and reflecting on change is itself empowering and is intricately linked to the development process¹. In this regard, while it is crucial that the data collected is credible and can hold up to external scrutiny, from an NGO perspective the process of designing an assessment process, collecting data and analysing that data also has to be robust.

For this reasons **it is important for UK NGOs to define and adopt an approach to assessing effectiveness that is firmly grounded in the realities of NGO management, supports the values of the sector, and recognises the choices that need to be made in managing effectiveness in an NGO on a day-to-day basis.** We need an approach that promotes an understanding of 'robust evidence' that is in proportion to the scale of NGO operations and appropriate to the diversity of interventions delivered by NGOs.

Based on consultations with a number of UK NGOs, eight core principles have been identified that should underline an NGO approach to assessing effectiveness; these should be reflected in any assessment of effectiveness, irrespective of the size of the organisation, scale of intervention, or the context. Some are related to what constitutes robust evidence; some are about ensuring a quality assessment process. As will be discussed below, we do not think the two can or should be separated.

3. Core principles for assessing and evidencing NGO effectiveness

The principles are grounded in the idea that an assessment of effectiveness should be a) robust and credible to a range of stakeholders (programme managers, donors, senior managers, peers, supporters etc) b) useful to an organisation and support ongoing learning and improvement, and c) support the development process itself by stimulating reflection and learning that helps shift power relations in favour of the less powerful and supports the process of empowerment. The eight core principles are:

1. Voice
2. Inclusion
3. Transparency
4. Utility
5. Triangulation
6. Comparison
7. Contribution
8. Appropriateness²

The principles are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For example, ensuring the perspectives of poor and marginalised groups are reflected in any assessment exercise and resulting evidence (Voice) supports the practice of triangulation while also supporting the learning and reflection. Likewise, being open and transparent about the results and method of an assessment and sources of evidence acts as a validation of the method, and supports external learning.

¹ Paulo Freire

² Principles have emerged through discussion with a range of NGOs and reference to a number of other principles and standards, including: OECD-DAC [evaluation standards](#), 2010; "*Broadening the range of designs and methods for impact evaluations*", Stern et al, draft report for DFID, Dec 2011; PPA and GPAF Evaluation Strategy, Coffey International, March 2012; [Measuring Empowerment](#), Dee Jupp, 2010, ACT Development: a guide to assessing our contribution to Change, 2009.

3.1. Voice – ask target groups for their perspective on the success of an intervention

Any assessment of effectiveness should be grounded in the perspectives of the target group (these might be poor and marginalised men and women and/or Southern partners depending on the nature of the intervention). Asking for the feedback from those that are supposed to benefit from an intervention is crucial to developing a credible and robust understanding of whether it has been a success and is central to an NGO understanding of what makes for compelling evidence. Assessments that go further than just soliciting feedback but also actively engage poor women and men in the data collection and analysis can also help shift power relations and support the process of empowerment.

3.2. Inclusion – understand how an intervention affects groups differently

Any assessment of change needs to uncover how different groups are affected by an intervention. The basis for disaggregating data will of course depend on the nature of the intervention. However, in most instances, at the very least, it is crucial to develop an understanding of and present data for how men and women are affected differently. Similarly, inclusion should be a key consideration in how data is collected. In soliciting feedback it is important to be aware of issues of discrimination and exclusion between groups. An assessment which recognises these power imbalances and actively seeks to address them and ensures the voices of excluded groups are reflected will provide more robust data than one that does not.

3.3. Transparency – be open about the methodology and sources used, the results achieved, and strengths and limitations of supporting evidence

Transparency and openness should underlie any assessment of effectiveness. NGOs should disclose information of the method and sources they used to form a judgement, the strengths and limitations of the evidence data, and the final results.

Transparency is a key building block of rigour because it facilitates external scrutiny. Being open about the steps that were taken in an assessment process allows someone external to retrace the data trail, interrogate the method and scrutinize the analysis. If an assessment process is sufficiently robust, an organisation should feel confident in defending their findings and methods in the face of external challenge and making the case for why it is fit for their purposes. In this way transparency can serve as an important validation mechanism.

Arguably, transparency is also a way for NGOs to engage with the issue of independence. Independence is often promoted as central to a robust assessment of effectiveness: by involving someone external to the intervention in data collection and analysis the judgement will be less biased and more objective. However this principle may not always be appropriate. Critical analysis and learning is a central part of the development process, so contracting this out sits uncomfortably with some NGOs. Funding/budget constrains can also be an issue. In these situations transparency is crucial to ensuring credibility. By disclosing details of the methods used, who was involved, why and the final results, others can judge if there has been potential bias and how it has affected the outcome. Without this transparency, NGO interventions that do not commission independent assessment run the risk of not being seen as objective or robust.

It is important to recognise, that transparency is more than simply making information public; to be transparent also requires being sensitive to issues of accessibility. Information needs to be disclosed in a way that makes it intelligible and accessible to stakeholders. For

example, methodologies should be clearly explained and results should be communicated in ways that take into consideration the accessibility needs of different stakeholders.

3.4. Utility – be clear on why data is being collected and how and when it will be used

NGOs collect data on their effectiveness for a range of different reasons: for reporting, management, learning, inform decision-making. Before data is collected there needs to be clarity on who is going to use the data, when and for what purposes. Linked to this, the data collected needs to be appropriate for the defined purpose and communicated in a form that supports the intended use. Lastly, any data collected should be analysed and discussed by all key stakeholders and clear action points identified.

3.5. Triangulation – collect the views of different stakeholders when drawing conclusion

Any efforts to monitor and assess effectiveness need to look for multiple answers to questions and be able to provide evidence that this has taken place. A rigorous assessment process requires that a set of activities be interrogated from different perspectives and alternative explanations explored as to why something has taken place. This will often require collecting different types of data, qualitative and quantitative, objective and subjective, and using a range of methods such as focus groups, surveys, ratings etc. The process of triangulation helps deepen and widen understanding, but also provides validation to a particular judgement. For example, a NGO that use a self-assessment tool to monitor changes in its monitoring and evaluation capacity and bases the assessment entirely on staff perspectives on what has changed could strengthen the rigour of the process by supplementing this data with the perspectives of its peers, or community members and exploring if there is convergence in opinions. When a NGO is developing a set of indicators for a programme, rather than relying on a single indicator, a basket of quantitative and qualitative indicators will give a more rounded and comprehensive picture of effectiveness.

3.6. Comparison – compare your data against a baseline

Assessing change implies the question 'change from what?' Without a baseline or standard against which to compare data it is difficult to indicate whether progress is being made. If there is a lack of baseline data for example, there needs to be clarity on how a basis for comparison is being collected (eg target group recollection of past situation or comparison with similar interventions elsewhere.)

3.7. Contribution – understand not only if change has happened, but also how, and what your contribution was

A robust assessment of effectiveness needs to include an analysis of causality. A NGO needs to go beyond collecting data that tells it what has changed and seek to understand why something has changed, and how. Developing this understanding is crucial to enabling an organisation to learn and improve its work. In doing so it is important that a NGO tries to understand what their specific contribution to change was. This requires exploring different causal factors that can be plausibly argued to have contributed to the observed result alongside the NGO intervention.

3.8. Appropriateness – ensure your approach is appropriate to the nature and scale of the intervention being reviewed

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In designing an assessment process appropriateness is key. First, the costs of data collection/analysis/validation should be proportionate to the intervention. The methods and resources invested in assessing effectiveness for a programme that covers an entire region and cost millions of pounds will look different to those for a programme that has a budget of a few hundred thousand pounds and operates in in four communities. Second, the costs of assessment need to be balanced with the ultimate benefits of the data. A programme may be small scale, but it might be highly innovative. In such cases it might be justified to spend a high proportion of the budget on monitoring and evaluation because it an untested type of intervention. Lastly, methods also need to be appropriate to staff capacity. Adopting tools and approaches that are only understood by a small group on M&E specialists has limited value in supporting on-going improvement and learning. Unless staff understand and can engage with tools, and see how using them can help them improve what they do they are unlikely to have ownership of the results.

4. Turning principles into practice: a proposed set of criteria for an NGO approach to assessing effectiveness

The following section presents a draft set of criteria for putting the eight core principles into practice. It may not be possible to reflect all criteria in every assessment process but rather it is important to find an appropriate balance across the principles. It should be the responsibility of the NGO to explain why certain criteria are not appropriate in a given context. As these criteria are developed it is important to remember that these need to apply to a wide range of NGOs of varying sizes and capacities. In this respect they need to be user-friendly and self-explanatory to a non-specialist audience. They also need to work across a range of different types of interventions from empowerment and accountability programmes, to education, to children’s care and protection. It may be that for some thematic areas additional principles need to be included. For example in Children’s protection and care programming the principle of ethics is key (eg gaining children’s or parental consent, knowing how to respond to cases of abuse etc.) Lastly, the criteria need to be replicable so that different people could apply them and reach the same conclusion. In this regard they need to be clearly defined, reasonably unambiguous, objectively ‘assessable’.

Draft criteria of an NGO approach to assessing and evidencing effectiveness	
An NGO’s process of assessing effectiveness is robust and credible if.....	
1. Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The views of target groups³ are collected directly • Target groups play an active role in defining indicators of success • Data and analysis is discussed with and validated by target groups and their feedback is included in the final conclusions
2. Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues of exclusion are considered and addressed during data collection and analysis so that the voices of excluded groups are heard • Results data is disaggregated according to gender and other relevant social differences
3. Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results data is made public in a form appropriate to the audience • Alongside the results data details of the method used to collect the data is made public, including sample size and its representativeness
4. Utility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The data that is collected is presented in a form that is most appropriate for its intended use • Data is analyzed collectively by all key stakeholders and action points are identified
5. Triangulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The views of different stakeholders are compared and analyzed in establishing if and how change has occurred • An appropriate balance of quantitative and qualitative data has been collected to inform conclusions

³ Depending on the type of programme ‘target groups’ can mean poor men and women and/or Southern partners

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conclusions are supported by findings from more than one data source
6. Comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results are compared against a baseline or some alternative basis for comparison (eg standard or peer) to show relative change
7. Contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A theory of change drawn on the best available evidence is in place and is used to test an NGO's contribution to change • In explaining why change has occurred (or not), a range of possible factors linked to and external to an NGO's work are explored that can be plausibly argued to have contributed to the observed result
8. Appropriate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The costs of data collection/analysis/validation are appropriate (and in proportion) to the intervention and the ultimate benefits of the data • The methods used to collect and analyse data are appropriate to the nature of the intervention and the purpose, scope and questions under review • The methods used for data collection and analysis are appropriate to staff capacity levels, are accessible to non-M&E specialists and support reflection and learning

The table below links each of the criteria to key steps in the assessment process:

Principles and criteria mapped onto the different steps in the assessment process	
Designing an process for assessing results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target groups play an active role in defining indicators of success • The costs of data collection/analysis/validation are appropriate (and in proportion) to the intervention and the ultimate benefits of the data • The methods used to collect and analyse data are appropriate to the nature of the intervention and the purpose, scope and questions under review • The methods used for data collection and analysis are appropriate to staff capacity levels, are accessible to non-M&E specialists and support reflection and learning
Collecting and analysing results data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The views of target groups are collected directly • Data and analysis is discussed with and validated by target groups and their feedback is included in the final conclusions • Issues of exclusion are considered and addressed during data collection and analysis so that the voices of excluded groups are heard • Results data is disaggregated according to gender and other relevant social differences • The views of different stakeholders are compared and analyzed in establishing if and how change has occurred • An appropriate balance of quantitative and qualitative data has been collected to inform conclusions • Conclusions are supported by findings from more than one data source • A theory of change drawn on the best available evidence is in place and is used to test an NGO's contribution to change • In explaining why change has occurred (or not), a range of possible factors linked to and external to an NGO's work are explored that can be plausibly argued to have contributed to the observed result • Results are compared against a baseline or some alternative basis for comparison (eg standard or peer) to show relative change
Using and communicating results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results data is made public in a form appropriate to the audience • Alongside the results data details of the method used to collect the data is made public, including sample size and its representativeness • The data that is collected is presented in a form that is most appropriate for its intended use • Data is analyzed collectively by all key stakeholders and action points are identified

5. Moving forward

Developing approaches and systems for measuring and assessing effectiveness that adequately balance issues such as rigour and cost effectiveness, credibility and flexibility, robustness and ease of use (see **Section 1**) is no easy task. The best way for UK NGOs to navigate these tensions is by developing and adopting a shared NGO approach. While there needs to be an absolute commitment to generating as robust evidence of change as possible, the approach we take needs to be fit for NGO purposes recognising the

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constraints NGOs work within, the scale of their operations, and the values that lie at the heart of why they exist.

What has been presented here is a draft for consultation. The principles and criteria will be further refined at a workshop on April 2nd and then piloted by a number of NGOs. We would like to include a first version of the principles and criteria in the Improve it Framework, which will be launched in the summer of 2012. Bond will work with UK NGOs to pilot this first version of the Framework throughout 2012/13 and will make adaptations based on emerging experience and feedback.