

Maximizing the Benefits of Self-Assessment: Tools and Tips

Terry Smutylo, Charles Lusthaus

Introduction

Background

Since being founded in 1970, IDRC has funded research aimed at solving development problems in the world's poorest regions. Driven by the conviction that sustainable development is possible only when people can create, access and use the knowledge necessary for their own well-being, IDRC has made strengthening the research capacity of individuals and institutions central to its approach.

Capacity-building for individual researchers is relatively straightforward. Like many agencies, IDRC has used training, collaboration with other researchers and research project funding with considerable success. By comparison, it is much less clear on how to build capacity within institutions and organizations. However, progress is being made. This paper presents some of what we have learned about helping research institutions become more effective and viable in working with IDRC and its partners over the past 10 years.

In the mid-eighties IDRC began refocusing its corporate strategy to redress the shortcoming of project funding as a mechanism for institutional strengthening. Recognizing that funding single research projects often leaves crucial gaps in an institution's research capacity, the Centre began experimenting with broader based, more integrated support targeted at key institutional needs.¹ This resulted in a period of

experimentation with various approaches. The issue became a concern of IDRC's Evaluation Unit when the time came to assess and draw lessons from these experiments.

The first problem was how to define organizational capacity in order to know where to look to assess the results of an intervention. In surveying the available approaches, IDRC found nothing comprehensive, yet practical enough for its purpose. In *Universalia Management Group*, a Canadian management consulting firm, IDRC found an intellectual partner with field experience in this area and interested in working to develop a suitable, action-oriented conceptual framework. The result; in 1995, IDRC published *Institutional Assessment: A Framework for Strengthening Organizational Capacity for IDRC's Research Partners*. This was followed by *Évaluation Institutionnelle*, the French version, in 1996. These books present an approach based on the thesis that an organization's performance (in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, relevance and financial viability) is the observable expression of its functioning on three dimensions: capacity (leadership, management, human resources); motivation (mission, culture, incentives); and environment (legal, social, technical). Performance, then, is the result of the way an organization uses its capacities, maintains motivation and relates to its environment.²

We field-tested the framework with five of IDRC's partners in West Africa and South Asia

Approaches to Strengthening Research Institutions (October, 1997)
Office of Planning and Evaluation, IDRC.

² For more background to the development of the framework see: *Giving the Evaluation Away: Challenges in a Learning-Based Approach to Institutional Assessment*, Fred Carden, IDRC (1997)

¹ The milestone for this recognition is the shift in policy based on approval of the recommendations in the discussion paper:

to find out whether it could: help diagnose organizational strengths and weaknesses; guide the formulation of a capacity-building response; and assist in assessing the outcome of an intervention.³ The partners responded positively to the framework and contributed their own ideas about how it might be refined and used. Concurrently, IDRC's Evaluation Unit was consulting Southern research and development managers on how to use evaluation more effectively to enhance organization performance.

Three strong messages emerged from this work. First, recipient organizations seldom get the opportunity to assess themselves. Thus they gain very limited experience with and benefits from donor-imposed assessments. Second, recipient organizations want to control and actively participate in assessments. Third, sensitivity to an organization's preparedness for, and the timeliness of an assessment is crucial to its outcome.

In response, IDRC and Universalia collaborated further to produce another book, *Enhancing Organizational Performance: A Toolbox for Self-Assessment*. This is a self-assessment guide with tools and techniques which can be adapted and used severally or together. It is aimed at empowering organizations to improve their performance, sustain their programs and provide the basis for more effective partnerships. In this paper, we present an overview of the tools presented in the book, followed by ten guiding principles to get the best results when applying them. These principles are derived from our field tests, our experience with project and program assessment and from our consultations on the evaluation process with Southern development organizations. We are very much in a learning mode in this work and would welcome feedback on all the ideas presented.

Why Self-Assessment?

IDRC's experience with evaluation and institutional assessment corroborates many of the claims by the proponents of participatory approaches in development. For example, Southern research managers at two recent workshops, one in East Africa, the other in South Asia, forcefully emphasized to donors the advantages of involving recipient institutions in assessments of their own performance. They felt their own information needs were being ignored and that they were being assessed against an unknown set of performance criteria. Whereas, project –centered evaluations tend to fragment and undermine institutional learning and change⁴, full participation gives the organization useful experience with the process and ownership of the results. This can:

- achieve a better balance between organizational and project performance concerns;
- increase the organization's capacity and disposition to use assessment as a management tool in the future;
- increase the likelihood that the findings/recommendations are realistic and formulated in accord with the organization's internal culture and overall goals, strategy and policies;
- maximize organizational learning; and
- use the resources available for assessment more effectively.

The desire to be an active rather than a passive partner showed up early and clearly in our institutional and organizational assessment (IOA) field tests. It is inconceivable that an organization would be comfortable to sit passively while an external team carries out an assessment in which it and its clients are the primary stakeholders. In such a case, from the organization's perspective, ownership would be misplaced. By definition, stakeholders are involved and if provision is not made for active and productive participation, the involvement

³ Lusthaus et al, *Organizational Assessment: Evolving Concepts, Methods and Practice*, Universalia, (1998)

⁴ *Revisiting Evaluation: A Study of the Process, Role and Contribution of Donor Funded Evaluations to Development Organizations*, Evaluation Unit, Manjul Bajaj, IDRC (1997)

can become covert and defensive. On the other hand, we also found that an exclusively internal assessment risks having lower external credibility and may suffer from the lack of fresh independent perspectives. The ideal therefore, is a combination approach involving both internal and external people on the assessment team. We have therefore created a set of tools that can be applied with varying proportions of internal and external involvement depending on the circumstances. In practice, the tools are designed to facilitate negotiation and management of an assessment process with the appropriate balance in joint ownership.

The Toolbox

The main elements of the tools presented in the book are described in this section.

Whether and Why

The first part of the toolbox guides an organization through deciding whether or not to conduct a self-assessment. Exercises help clarify the purpose and the main clients and also to determine whether the attitudes and conditions within the organization would support and benefit from an assessment. If the decision is taken to proceed, the information gathered and synthesized with these exercises helps in designing and managing the process. Sometimes, an organization is not willing to conduct a full-scale assessment, but decides to conduct a smaller, problem-based exercise focussing on a specific area or situation. There is help here for designing the appropriate exercise in such cases. Guidance is also offered on stakeholder analysis (“Mapping the Stakeholders”), and on team formation and team building to assist in defining the roles and responsibilities for the various players in the self-assessment.

Finding the Focus

Identifying the issues on which the self-assessment will focus is the key step in planning it. Part II of the book guides the self-assessment team through: diagnosing the organizational issues – building on the identified purpose of the

self-assessment; identifying the indicators and information sources for each issue; and developing the instruments for collecting and analyzing the relevant information.

Dealing with Data

Part III of the book is a guide to collecting and analyzing the data, and to verifying and communicating the results.

Making Findings Meaningful

The conceptual framework underlying this approach is used to clarify important issues, guide the collection of data, and organize the findings so they say something useful about organizational performance



Source: A Guide to Organizational Self-Assessment. Lusthaus, Charles et.al., Universalialia / IDRC; DRAFT, January 1998.

Guiding Principles for Organizational Analysis

Applying the tools and techniques outlined above helps create a learning exercise tailored specifically to the circumstances and inclinations of the organizations at the time of the assessment. In tailoring the process to an organization’s needs, some of these tools may be judged inappropriate and others may have to be radically changed to fit the situation. We would encourage organizations and their assessment teams to be creative. Seek out ideas, tools and techniques from other sources and create or adapt what is needed yourselves.

While we enthusiastically encourage innovation and selectivity, our experience suggests that, whatever assessment techniques are applied, there are some aspects of the process which are crucial to success. These must be considered thoroughly and the appropriate actions taken. These considerations are presented as “guiding principles” in this section. Other people experimenting with institutional strengthening may consider different issues important. We would like to hear about these experiences and

would welcome a dialogue with those working on the topic using our or other approaches.

Each of the 10 guiding principles are relevant, to a greater or lesser degree, at particular stages of an organizational analysis. Nonetheless, they all merit consideration. The following figure summarizes the main considerations at each stage.

10 Guiding Principles of Organizational Self-Assessment

	DESIGN/PREPARATION (PRE)	ASSESSMENT (INTRA)	IMPLEMENTATION (POST)
1. Clarify the Purpose	Who will use it? How? Why?	Reassess Relevance	Presentation of results supports purpose & targets users
2. Use a Conceptual Framework	Structure questions, organizes data collection & analysis, integrates findings	Framework applied through data collection instruments	Helps learning & clarifies the relationship among findings
3. Be clear about process & method	Need to have a definite shape and be understood by all	Data collection process and instruments must be credible, understandable, & friendly to stakeholders	Findings considered valid & reliable
4. Organizational Readiness	Determine realistic scale & focus. Take special needs into account	Able to resolve problems and/or increase receptivity & participation	Target levels of organization ready & best able to integrate findings
5. Mapping the Stakeholders	Ensures ownership & input from appropriate levels of organization	Feedback loops to ensure comfort & participation of stakeholders	Verify results & recommendations
6. Credible Facilitation	Fair, impartial and possesses necessary skills to conduct the assessment	Can mediate & motivate participants, facilitate receptivity, respond to early problems	Facilitates action planning for implementing the results
7. Be Rigorous	Verify quality of design, methods, & process	Quality control of data analysis & interpretation	Verify findings with stakeholders
8. Target Findings	Reporting modes tailored to users & environment	Reporting early in process	Accepted & verified gradually therefore move directly to action planning
9. Check the Costs Against Benefits	Ensure effort required justifies benefits	Keep costs within budget	Link costs to benefits & learn for next time
10. Put Ethics First	Make process as clear as possible to stakeholders	Monitor, maintain & increase transparency	Make assumptions & agendas explicit

Our experience shows that all ten principles could be important at any of the three main stages in the institutional self-assessment process: during design or preparation (pre);

during the assessment itself (intra); and as the results are being disseminated and implemented (post). Depending on the stage, applying these principles may require the attention of different

players. In the following section we will outline some of the ways each principle can be applied at the pre-, intra- and post- stages of self-assessment.

Guiding Principles

Clarify the Purpose

When beginning an assessment, an essential first step is to clarify who will use it, how and for what purpose. This will provide reference points throughout the process against which to check progress. At the preparation stage, being clear on the purpose will help design an exercise which is aimed at the correct issues, has the appropriate scale and scope, and is supported by the interested stakeholders. During the assessment, being able to refer back to a clear statement of purpose and consultation with the eventual users will enable the team to monitor the ongoing relevance of the exercise. A periodic reassessment answers the question: “Is this self-assessment giving us what we need?” The necessary adjustments can then be made to keep the progress on track or to develop new lines of inquiry.

At the reporting and implementation stage, being clear on the purpose of the self-assessment will help you ensure that the results are presented so that they support the purpose and target the users. Often the findings can be presented as an “action plan”, based on the relevant findings, and aimed at influencing certain players to work towards the desired changes.

Use a Conceptual Framework

At the design stage, organizations generally have no trouble generating lists of the issues and questions they would like to address. Towards the end of the assessment, the challenge is to make sense of all the data that has been collected on the issues identified as major concerns. Using a conceptual framework helps structure questions, organize data collection and analysis, and integrate findings. It helps the assessment team see the findings on various

dimensions of their organization in relation to each other. The language of the framework helps the various stakeholders and team members reach a common perspective on the assessment. Achieving a consensual interpretation of the results ultimately, helps learning. A framework illuminates the synergies among the factors in an organization’s capacity, thereby clarifying the relationship among the findings. It helps foster a systems perspective which allows the users of the assessment to develop an understanding of the interrelated influences on their organization’s performance. During the assessment process, the framework is applied through the data collection instruments. Its usefulness is thereby tested and there are opportunities for revisions.

Be Clear about Process and Method

Implicit in much of the foregoing is the fact that an organizational assessment can take on numerous forms. Just saying the words does not immediately conjure up a set piece activity, as do the words “audit” or “evaluation”. The organizational assessment will take whatever form the organization decides it will take. Consequently, once it is designed and the various features crystallize, it is extremely important to let all stakeholders know what to expect and to keep them informed as the process continues. The process and methods to be used need to have a definite shape and be understood by all. Stakeholders find comfort in seeing that the instruments, indicators and information sources are driven by the purpose and that the findings will be structured according to the conceptual approach. During the assessment, it is important that the stakeholder-informants find the data collection process and instruments credible understandable and friendly. Technical verification of the process and methods by an arms-length expert could help increase comfort and credibility so that, when reported, the findings are considered valid and reliable.

Organizational Readiness

In determining whether and how to proceed, consider how the assessment fits within the current state of the organization. Recent history and anticipated events affect staff willingness to raise certain issues or engage in certain processes.

Carefully observing and listening to the indicators of an organization's readiness, the team can take special needs and sensitivities into account and decide on realistic scale and focus for the assessment. During the process, the team which stays attentive to reactions in the organization is in a position to iron out problems or to increase receptivity and participation when and where required. This will enable the results and recommendations to be packaged for release with different audiences in mind. It may be possible and desirable to target certain messages at the units or levels of the organization ready or best able to integrate them.

Mapping the Stakeholders

Knowing the interests of the users/clients for the assessment as well as who else will be interested or affected is important for managing the assessment. It allows the team to ensure ownership and input from the appropriate quarters in the organization. Ownership and support from different quarters is crucial at particular stages. At the outset, strong endorsement and championing by senior management implies organizational commitment. Both of which are important during the assessment. And again, at the conclusion, buy-in from the senior levels is absolutely essential to the utilization of the findings. Knowing the stakeholders well also provides the map on which can be plotted the feedback loops necessary to ensure their comfort or active participation as and when required. It is also very helpful to verify results and recommendations among those with the relevant knowledge or responsibility early and often. This can greatly improve the quality of interpretation of the findings and increase the likelihood of implementation

Credible Facilitation

A facilitator/evaluator can add great value to the assessment process. The evaluator/facilitator(s) need to be credible and hold the confidence of all participants. Credibility will be determined by skill, experience, and impartiality. Given the specialized and potentially sensitive nature of organizational self-assessment, it is usually difficult to find someone with these characteristics within the organization for this role. An external person with the appropriate technical skills and broader experience may also be easier to accept as impartial and may bring fresh perspectives to the exercise. A disinterested party: can help mediate among participants if necessary; may be able to motivate people to higher levels of participation; and can enhance the credibility of the assessment by contributing to or auditing its design and implementation. It is important that, in addition to being seen as fair and impartial, the facilitator also clearly possess skills appropriate to the purpose of the assessment. Drawing on experience gained in other settings, the facilitator can augment receptivity across the organization and can help spot problems early and suggest adjustments to the process if necessary. This role also needs the expertise in analyzing data and, ideally, in action planning for implementing the results.

Be Rigorous

Having designed a process and methods consistent with the clearly-defined purpose; having established buy-in across the organization; and having secured the participation of ethical, credible evaluators; the exercise needs to be pursued with rigor. Stakes can be high in changing an organization. Using the technical expertise available to it, the assessment team monitors the design, methods and outputs throughout the process. Quality control to maintain the reliability of the data analysis and interpretation ensures that both the spirit behind the assessment and the methods chosen for its overall design are adhered to. At the analysis and reporting stages willingness to rigorously verify the findings with stakeholders

strengthens the basis on which the recommended actions are built.

Target the Findings

The modes selected for reporting and disseminating the results need to be tailored to the users and relevant to the organizational environment. Reporting starts early in the assessment process in order to verify accuracy, to increase the volume of the data and to establish a reporting pattern, which is comfortable and effective for stakeholders. Depending on the feedback, adjustments can then be made to the way the data is packaged and/or the modes of reporting. Gradually building up knowledge across the organization about the assessment's findings, means that they can be verified and gradually understood and accepted. In the final reporting, you can then move directly into action planning because the stage has been set for the team to move stakeholders to respond to the finding by committing to an scheduling actions.

Check Costs against Benefits

At the outset, part of the “go/no go” decision depends on whether the level of effort required for self-assessment is justified by the expected benefits. The financial and human resource costs include, not only fees for consultants and the time of team members, but also time for the staff involvement throughout the organization. This is another area to be monitored by the assessment team: keeping costs within the budgeted limits. Shortly after the conclusion of the exercise, it is useful to tally the accounts. Linking all costs to the benefits realized (and anticipated in future) enables the team and the organization to learn for next time. Was the level of effort within the expected limits? How could the assessment be more effective and efficient? Overall, was the effort worth it?

Put Ethics First

Evaluation in any form, including organizational assessment, is often viewed with suspicion. A common expectation is that the exercise will be used secretly or injuriously; perhaps to justify a

cut in staff, a reduction in funding, or for some other unpleasantness. Such misgivings undermine an assessment by making participation and the collected data incomplete or unreliable. It is important, therefore, that all stakeholders have effective input into the assessment and that the information gathered is used with due regard and sensitivity to issues such as confidentiality, fairness, misrepresentation and misuse. A key to participant confidence is a transparent process which, as it proceeds, makes it clear that the stated purposes are really what is driving it.

Realistically, it is often not possible to know or articulate all the underlying purposes and intentions of the main players. Therefore, it is important that the team make efforts throughout the process to stay au courant of purposes or agendas emerge as things proceed. Total transparency may not be achievable – but efforts should be undertaken to make all issues as clear as possible to all stakeholders. An organizational self-assessment requires a high level of transparency which should be maintained and increased during the exercise. At the final stages in which results and responses are being formulated and verified among stakeholders, hidden agendas or implicit assumptions may become clear. These should be made explicit so that they can be discussed, challenged and reconciled with data and the expectations of the participants. Consensus on the major assumptions is essential if the results of the assessment are to be credible, and the appropriate responses initiated.

Conclusions

This paper has focussed on how an organization can discover what to do to improve its ability to fulfill its mission and objectives. The process is more like a check-up to see what, if anything, needs fixing rather than a prescription for how to fix it. Self-assessment adds pieces to the picture available for strategic management through a process which creates a shared vision and motivation among the players important to an organization's performance to engage in understanding and improving it. This paper

implies that, in order to maximize the benefits of organizational self-assessment, we need two things. First, we need to ensure that the results are used; and second, we need to build on and share learning experiences with others.

With respect to ensuring use, the key is found in securing the ongoing commitment to this as a learning and change process – both within and external to the organization. The principles are intended to guide us in that direction. Buy-in for a clearly-defined purpose; a credible process that stays focussed on the relevant issues; and findings that are universally understood and which are meaningful and practical to their users throughout the organization – all of these will drive toward the findings being picked up and applied.

The second part of maximizing the benefits from self-assessment lies in building a body of knowledge about how to do and use it. It lies in extending the benefits beyond the individual organizations with which we work, to make our experience accessible, to be shared and built on by others. We offer the ideas in this paper based on our experience with IDRC and its partner institutions in the hope that others will report on the outcomes of their own efforts. The resulting synergies and learning will deepen understanding in this field and expand the number of organizations that can learn from it.

Universalia is a Management Consulting Firm located at:

5252 De Maisonneuve West, Suite 310
Montréal, Québec, Canada H4A 3S5
Tel: 514-485-3565, Fax: 514-485-3210
Website: www.universalia.com

F:\umg\corporate\occasional papers\org_asses\33_self-ass_tools&tips.doc