

The RORG-Network's 2002/2003 South evaluation: Lessons for DE from a Norwegian experiment

Stiaan van der Merwe and **Arnfinn Nygaard** tell of issues that arose when 'the South' was asked to engage with a Northern organisation to do an evaluation of development education in 'the North'. Their story raises important, though sometimes uncomfortable, questions for all DE practitioners in the North.

Introduction

The RORG-Network is a network of organisations which receive money from the Norwegian Government to engage in DE. It emerged from a history in which some NGOs in Norway have struggled to determine an 'independent' agenda for DE and to strive towards authenticity in their relationships with the South. The RORG-Network's decision in 2002 to be evaluated from 'the South' was motivated by the notion that 'the South' is the primary stakeholder of DE in 'the North' and should therefore be enabled to do the primary external stakeholder evaluation.

The terms of reference were:

- to assess the overall efficacy of the DE work of the RORGs (i.e. the member organisations).
- to assess the usefulness of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for DE
- to assist the RORGs in their future work.

The article will focus on the first and last items of the terms of reference, with particular reference to the processes and experiences of engaging the RORG as an organisation and individual RORGs.

A difficult and risky process

Great anticipation and excitement existed within the RORG-Network about the South evaluation experiment. However, at a very early stage it became evident that the project was seriously affected by constraints – such as a predetermined budget and a limited time frame of one year. In addition, pressures and risks not clearly anticipated at the start impacted on the process. Not least of these was suspicion about why the North was asking the South to evaluate a programme such as this and suspicion related to the overall agenda and motivation for doing DE in the North. Furthermore, the phenomenon of DE was new to the evaluators from the South. However, sufficient levels of mutual trust were gradually and often painfully crafted and generated and ultimately carried the project.

A lack of clarity regarding a range of fundamental issues concerning DE, including conceptual clarity, also surfaced amongst the RORG-Network. How could the efficacy of the core business of an organisation be evaluated under such conditions? In mitigation, during the evaluation process it became clear that the RORG-Network is not the only player in 'the North' to struggle to come to grips with the concept, goals and practices of DE. Furthermore, the term

'Development Education' is an English expression with which members were unfamiliar. The two Norwegian terms currently used by members, literally translated, refer to 'information work' and to 'people's education' or 'people's enlightenment' regarding North/South and international development issues. These terms provided for interesting and intense discussions.

The evaluation process was deepened and enriched by starting to address fundamental questions including:

- the context within which and for which DE is done
- conceptual clarity on the core business of DE
- vision and mission for DE in general and for RORG in particular
- strategic thinking, planning and management, as a way to think and act constructively beyond a mechanistic pursuit of existing projects
- a comprehensive pedagogy or pedagogies for DE in the North and Norway in particular, with holistic aims of changing attitudes, practices and policies vis-à-vis the South, and also in pursuit of changing Norwegian society regarding North/South and South/North dynamics, needs and expectations. Possible themes for considering such pedagogies were: 'A pedagogy for the rich and powerful' or 'A pedagogy for solidarity'
- mandate to do DE vis-à-vis the South.
- accountability to the South.
- the involvement and permanent presence of 'the South' in DE in Norway

These basic questions and issues effectively became the benchmarks for evaluating the efficacy of the RORG-Network's engagement with DE. The overall evaluation, as viewed from 'the South', was that:

Regardless of the quantity of work being done and the quality of intent, the very strong notion cannot be avoided, namely that the overall efficacy of the Development Education by the RORG-Network is questionable.

Though carefully worded and not denying the valuable work being done, this perspective was clearly no easy point to make and probably a more painful one to receive. The recommendations following this observation did not offer any simple solutions, but envisaged a comprehensive,

proactive and systematic strategic process to address issues raised by the evaluation. It is hoped that such a process will generate broad-ranging solutions.

Authentic North/South and South/North partnership

A major peculiarity of a southern evaluation of a northern development institution, at this point in time, is the reversal of roles from traditional North/South relations. The process became both a learning process in external stakeholder involvement (in this case evaluation) and a learning curve in authentic North/South organisational cooperation.

Norwegian organisations experienced what it means to be looked at from ‘the South’, a context within which many organisations work and where they are used to being ‘in control’, mainly by virtue of being a donor or being close to where financial resources are. Questions relating to fundamental issues were raised, from an angle and context which could not be ignored. The evaluation highlighted the need for co-ownership and a permanent presence of ‘the South’ in the ‘organisational mind and life’ of northern development organisations. As a result, the work done by the RORG-Network and members will have to be strategically re-imagined. ‘The South’ was seen as a positive change agent for this organisation and its members.

If true partnership is to develop, albeit in the context of unequal power relations, the question is, What could and should ‘the South’ do for you and your organisation, other than being a grateful recipient of assistance? Questions relating to North/South organisational cooperation included the following:

- Is ‘the South’ adequately involved in all phases and aspects of strategic management of your core business, including conceptualisation, planning, priority setting, costing, implementation, management of strategic changes, evaluation, reporting (accountability), etc?
- How can you be accountable to ‘the South’ if the latter does not co-own the DE project in the North? Why should ‘the South’ co-own the DE project? What is in it for ‘the South’?
- Is ‘the South’ involved in developing and providing mandates to act ‘on behalf of’ or ‘in the interest of the South’ in Norway/‘the North’?
- Is consultation with ‘the South’ broad enough and does it go beyond specific and carefully selected project partners?
- Are ‘partners’ in ‘the South’ empowered to raise critical questions without fear of (especially financial) reprisal? What values, policies, procedures and other mechanisms exist to ensure such an engagement?
- How can actors (organisations, networks, individuals) in

‘the South’ and in particular project partners become part of your capacity to improve the efficacy of your work locally, in ‘the North’ and in ‘the South’?

- Is it possible for partners in ‘the South’ to develop solidarity with the Northern DE agenda? How can it be done if partners in ‘the North’ have not declared upfront their struggles for change in their own context? What does solidarity with ‘the South’ mean if there is no reason for ‘the South’ to be in solidarity with you and your struggle in your context as well?

Who is ‘the South’?

Who or what represents the ‘authentic voice of the South’ in a ‘South evaluation’ of a northern development institution? Nobody is mandated to represent ‘the South’ in all its complexities. In the case of the RORG evaluation it was made abundantly clear that the individuals involved in this process do not represent ‘the South’, though symbolically they do ‘represent’ (i.e. come from) Asia, Africa and Latin America. In addressing this question northern development organisations will have to declare and clarify their extent of involvement in ‘the South’ to indicate their ability to critically discern ‘the voices from the South’, just as organisations in the South do vis-à-vis the North.

Can an opinion or evaluation from ‘the South’ demand uncritical acceptance from an organisation in ‘the North’? It was mutually agreed that it would be arrogant for any person or group to demand uncritical acceptance, replicating the arrogance often displayed towards ‘the South’ by actors from ‘the North’. However, the discourse on the ‘moral divide’ between the global North and the global South, with particular reference to the inequities between the two and global injustices perpetrated towards ‘the South’ by means of development aid and structural political and economic violence puts a different dimension on the discussion. When terms such as ‘global apartheid’, ‘neo-colonialism’, ‘neo-imperialism’, ‘global Nazism’ become relevant in discussions of North/South issues (and they are relevant), then fundamental and irreconcilably divisive choices of solidarity become eminent, with all the political, economic and moral repercussions attached. Even in such cases of solidarity open critical discourse has to take place and needs to be well managed. The basic question for development organisations in ‘the North’ is: from which position and in whose interests are critical discussions with ‘the South’ conducted?

Who is ‘the North’ accountable to in ‘the South’? This very practical question has no right answer. In the end it is a matter of choice. Proper account should be given to what informed the choice including processes of consultation with actors in ‘the South’. Broad involvement beyond project partners must be demonstrated including proper engagement with critical voices. On the whole a principled, explicit and

What could and should ‘the South’ do for you and your organisation, other than being a grateful recipient of assistance?

demonstrable commitment towards accountability to the majority of people on earth and the environment should be a general guiding line prior to focusing on organisational accountability to partner organisations in the South.

RORG's experience and response

For the RORG-Network, it was a unique and challenging experience to be subjected to an evaluation by representatives from 'the South'.

It may still be too early to judge its lasting impact, but 2003 was a year for serious reflection and debate within the Network on how to apply and follow-up on the findings and challenges of the evaluation report. The

Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the RORG-Network in April 2003 took a decision on the need for 'a thorough consideration and follow-up process on the report and recommendations from the South-evaluation' and the Steering Committee was mandated to facilitate the process.

At a joint meeting in September 2003 the Network agreed to start the process by focusing on two basic questions raised by the evaluation:

- 1) What is Development Education?
- 2) Views from the South / Co-operation with the South. Why, whom and how?

These issues were debated at a 2-day joint seminar in November, resulting in two draft position papers, to be further discussed within each member organisation for final consideration and adoption at the AGM in 2004. As part of this process the existing South-partners of the RORGs, and their relevance in development education, will be mapped out as a basis for debate and possible decisions on the 'Whom?-question'.

The South-evaluation also looked into southern views on the UN Development Millennium Goals (MDGs) and their relevance and significance in development education. The evaluation found that knowledge and engagement with the MDGs in the South (as well as in the North) was low and the levels of suspicion and criticism high. The report recommended 'a process of critical engagement with the MDGs'.

The question of how to apply this recommendation was tested at the end of 2003, as the Norwegian Minister for International Development invited the RORG-Network to take part in a joint campaign 'to create enthusiasm' for the MDGs. The RORG-Network solicited a snap survey on Southern African NGO's positions on the MDGs, after efforts by the UNDP and others during 2003 to raise interest

and engagement with the goals. The findings of the survey added to existing scepticism among the RORGs. The RORG-Network stated that it did not find any justification for a campaign aimed at creating 'enthusiasm' for the MDGs, but rather a campaign to raise awareness and critical debate. The Network further suggested that a national campaign in Norway should begin with a conference with Southern

partners to develop analysis and substance for the campaign.

Initiatives have been taken amongst RORGs to develop – in conjunction with Southern partners – a critical assessment of the MDGs and MDG 8 (international partnership) in particular, discussing the option

of developing alternative targets for the North within MDG 8.

Closing remarks

NGO networks do not change easily, particularly when they encompass a rich political, ideological and religious diversity among member organisations. Nevertheless, the South-evaluation of the RORG-Network has stimulated critical self-reflection and appears to have the potential for lasting impact on the life and functioning of the Network. The levels of buy-in are most encouraging. Those involved from the South found exemplary the approach taken by RORG, both in having the evaluation and in the management of a fragile, first of its kind, experiment.

Ultimately, the RORG-Network's experience suggests that such evaluations should not only become a permanent feature in its own organisational life, but also for organisations or networks dealing with DE in the North in general. Notably, this experiment was observed to be signalling 'paradigm shift' in development evaluation, during the recently held OECD/DAC conference in Paris. It is hoped that this story will inspire and assist others in this direction as well.

Arnfinn Nygaard is the RORG-Network Coordinator. rorg@rorg.no; anygaard@chello.no

Stiaan van der Merwe is Project Coordinator of the RORG South Evaluation, 2002/2003 vdm@sn.apc.org

The full report of the South evaluation: *South Evaluation of the Rorg-Network In Norway – a View from the South on Development Education in the North*, is available and can be downloaded from the RORG Network web-site:

<http://solidaritetshuset.org/rorg/english/south.htm>