

THE PRACTICE OF ORGANISATIONAL ASSESSMENT

Survey results & considerations



Eric Kamphuis
Joanne Harnmeijer
Frans Verberne

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PSO Knowledge and Learning Centre / ETC Netherlands

CONTENTS

I.	FOREWORD	2
II.	TYPES OF ORGANISATIONAL ASSESSMENT	3
II.1	Notes on the history of OA	3
II.2	Three main types of OA	3
II.3	How to choose an assessment methodology	4
III.	HOW DO PSO MEMBERS AND THEIR PARTNERS SEE OA?	6
III.1	Introduction	6
III.2	Capacity building and OA in the organisation's policy	6
III.2.1	Familiarity with Organisational Assessment	6
III.2.2	The role of OA in the policy of the PSO member organisation	6
III.2.3	How do partners look at the OA policy of the PSO member organisations?	7
III.2.4	Trust as a basis for an effective OA policy	8
III.3	Current working situation and required skills	9
III.3.1	Do certain OA practices/tools enjoy preference?	9
III.3.2	How to match the OA approach to the partner's characteristics	10
III.3.3	How to make good use of experts for carrying out OA	10
III.3.4	How to discuss OA experiences with partners and advise them on OA tools	11
III.3.5	How to value an OA process/product in terms of impact as well	12
III.4	Learning within PSO member organisations	12
III.4.1	Experiences with OA training and OA training needs	12
III.4.2	Reflection on OA processes and registering experiences	13
III.5	Joint learning about OA with other member organisations	13
IV.	HOW DO RESOURCE PERSONS OUTSIDE OF PSO LOOK AT OA?	15
IV.1	Introduction	15
IV.2	Resource persons' statements	15
IV.2.1	What is meant by Organisational Assessment?	15
IV.2.2	What is the place of OA in organisational development?	15
IV.2.3	Are certain OA tools preferable?	15
IV.2.4	What are the conditions for applying OA?	16
IV.2.5	What skills does OA require?	16
IV.2.6	What impact does OA have on the capacity of organisations?	17
IV.2.7	How can OA be learned?	17
IV.2.8	How should professional exchange of OA experience take place?	18
IV.2.9	How should the quality of OA be safeguarded?	18
V	CONCLUSIONS: WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THE INTERVIEWS?	19
V.1	Introduction	19
V.2	Moment or process?	19
V.3	Functionality and dependence	19
V.4	Content: only tailor-made solutions possible?	20
V.5	Professional competency	21
V.6	Organisational OA Learning	21
V.7	OA-related interactions	23
V.8	Quality	23
V.9	'Keep it simple' and 'Easy does it'	24
	Annex I List of interviewees	25
	Annex II Features Knowledge/Experience Profiles & Related Possible Learning activities	26
	Annex III Reports by Hettie Walters and Suzanne Boomsma on this paper	27

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I. FOREWORD

Objectives

This publication is the result of study and the collection and analysis of data on the issue of Organisational Assessment (OA). PSO's Knowledge Centre (PSO KC) assigned a team of ETC Netherlands (an independent consultancy agency in the field of capacity building) to conduct a study on the practice of OA. The objective of the study was to obtain a better insight into the different OA practices PSO members were applying, in their experiences with these practices, and in their learning needs in the field of OA. The outcomes of the study were to serve a joint reflection by PSO and its members on PSO's OA learning trajectory in its current setup and its possible future. The publication therefore aims at providing input for a PSO KC learning conference on OA for PSO members to be held on 28 April 2005.

Approach

In two series of interviews¹, about half of the PSO members were interviewed on a wide range of issues related to OA. All interviews were conducted by phone and had a semi-structured character. Often they turned out to be interesting and animated exchanges on the various aspects of importance for OA.

The preliminary results of the interviews were discussed in a workshop with the interviewees on 14 December 2004. Possible further steps in the OA learning trajectory were also subject of the deliberations during the workshop.

Originally it was foreseen to involve a selection of partners of PSO members in exchanges on OA as well. It was however decided in the mentioned workshop to further continue the exchanges between the PSO members and PSO and amongst the members themselves. The members' partners were to be involved after this exercise; how that would take shape was to be determined in the OA learning conference.

Apart from interviewing PSO members, ten resource persons from different walks of commercial organisation advisory services, working for the public and corporate sector, were interviewed. This was done to get an outsider's view on the issue of OA and to try to determine whether lessons could be learned from them.

The team wishes to express, also on behalf of PSO KC, its sincere appreciation to the interviewed members and resource persons for their time and the frankness they showed.

Content of this publication

A short introductory chapter (II) characterises different types of OA. The content of this chapter is largely based on a reflection on OA by the Impact Alliance². Chapter III includes the results of interviews with member organisations and chapter IV the input of other resource persons. The final chapter (V) presents the team's analysis and reflection. Different themes linked to OA are considered: moment vs. process, dependence, tailor-made solutions, professional competency, organisational OA learning, interaction in partner relations, quality, and finally a plea against complicating OA too much.

The team, comprising Eric Kamphuis, Joanne Harnmeijer and Frans Verberne, expresses its gratitude to PSO KC for the lively and fruitful exchanges and its thorough preparations, which contributed greatly to the coming about of this document.

The Hague / Leusden, 15 April 2005

Eric Kamphuis
(On behalf of the ETC Netherlands team)

¹ Also see Annex I

² International member organisation (including PSO) dedicated to capacity development processes.

II TYPES OF ORGANISATIONAL ASSESSMENT

II.1 Notes on the history of OA

Before presenting the results of the study, we offer some information on the history of OA and what types of OA have emerged over time. This description intends to inform the reader about the various issues/questions linked to OA with the aim of a better understanding of the presented study results. The basis for the description is an article on OA that the Impact Alliance Secretariat has written on PSO KC's request.³ Parts of that article are summarised and presented in this chapter. The statements in the article do not necessarily coincide with the interview outcomes in the next chapter, nor should they be regarded as the sole framework for analysis of these outcomes.⁴

The current OA tools and practices build on a rich tradition of applied research, as well as on a growing body of OA tools that have been developed in both the corporate and public sectors since the late 1950s. Many assessment instruments stem from theories on individual, group and organisational behaviour.



The foundation for these OA tools can be viewed from two perspectives. The first is philosophical: during the late 1950s and 1960s, the basic assumptions on organisational development were largely influenced by a human resources oriented philosophy in which people, work, organisations, and change were interrelated. Central issues herein were learning processes, the learners themselves and their impact on the evolution of adult learning principles, coaching, self-direction and the potential of untapped human resources.

The second perspective is of a methodological character. The tools that form the basis of OA were used by applied social scientists from the early 20th century onwards. Since then survey techniques on organisations and their problems have been developed, as well as the use of survey outcomes in feedback to those aiming to improve organisational performance and to stimulate joint planning.

Before going into the results of the interviews with PSO members and OA resource persons, we offer a short description of the three main OA types that the Impact Alliance article distinguishes, focusing on two questions: 'Who is assessing?' and 'What form does the exercise take?' Finally, we consider the aspects that contribute to the selection of OA tools.

II.2 Three main types of OA

The Impact Alliance article distinguishes three types of OA: Traditional Assessment, Self-Assessment and Customised Self-Assessment.

³ It concerns the article 'Understanding Organizational Assessment' by Evan Bloom, Meg Kinghorn, and Betsy Kummer, published by the Impact Alliance Secretariat in cooperation with PSO (PSO Newsletter November 2003)

⁴ The same applies to the comprehensive overview of OA methods and guidelines that PSO's website provides. See <http://www.pso.nl/knowledgecenter/dossier.asp?dossier=1>

Traditional Assessment

Traditional Assessment refers to the practice which uses standardised assessment checklists. These checklists highlight key areas of organisational tasks and functions (e.g. vision, operations, human resources, networking, etc.). External experts are instrumental in their use. The checklist outcomes are put down in a final report that is usually shared with the organisation. Traditional Assessment takes the least amount of time and money. It is usually considered as the most objective, since it is based on the expert's outside observations. However, there is a danger of the external expert becoming the sole determiner of the organisation's learning needs. Traditional Assessment can easily become an obstacle for continual internal learning processes that can benefit organisational strengthening.

Self-Assessment

In Self-Assessment participation is the central principle. The different members of the organisation are recognised as the main agents of organisational development. Self-Assessment has gained popularity recently, because it encourages ownership of the results by involving staff in the assessment process. An external facilitator leads the organisation members through their own analysis of their capacities in the different functional areas, making the results more subjective. The process may last for a few days and include a follow-up meeting to interpret the results to the staff. A vast range of Self-Assessment tools have been developed over time in both Northern and Southern countries.⁵

Customised Self-Assessment

Taking participation further, a new generation of assessment has dropped assessment forms and standard areas of analysis in order to empower participants to become their own leading experts. Customised Self-Assessment views organisations as unique and complex. Such assessments often become an organisational strengthening intervention in themselves. They can be customised for specific functional areas, such as financial management, advocacy or disaster response and may involve the participation of several organisations that share a common mission and learning agenda. Because the assessment goes deeper, facilitation of a complete process may require a longer time commitment.⁶

II.3 How to choose an assessment methodology

Considerations

In recent PSO-related publications on OA⁷ a number of issues were raised concerning the choice of an appropriate assessment methodology. The following considerations do not reflect the outcomes of the interviews described in the next chapter, but stem from these publications.

With all the differences in the multitude of assessment tools, it can be very difficult to choose the best assessment methodology. Each has its strengths and weaknesses and its own role to play. Far too often a tool is selected with the wrong arguments (its availability, conciseness, or quantitative character) and may therefore not yield satisfactory results or even do harm. It is therefore important to consider the purpose of an OA, the correspondence between the

⁵ Organisational Capacity Assessment Tool (OCAT), Discussion-Oriented Organisational Self-Assessment (DOSA), Institutional Self Reliance (ISR), Institutional Strength Assessment (ISA), From the Roots Up (World Neighbours), and the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) Tool. Many Southern organisations are also developing their own methodologies. CADECO uses African proverbs to enhance communication.

⁶ Some well-known tools are Organisational Capacity Self-Assessment (OCA), and Appreciative Inquiry (CRWRC).

⁷ The Impact Alliance article; the PSO newsletter on OA of November 2003.

assessment method and the culture/strategies of the organisation to be assessed, and the partner relationship.

Purpose

The assessment's goal should be clear. Is it to provide information to the organisation or to the donor/partner? Is it to promote learning, measurement or accountability? If the purpose of OA is to ensure that a funding recipient has the basic infrastructure to manage a programme or project, traditional assessment is an option. If monitoring of progress of a capacity strengthening programme is the central issue, a self-assessment might be appropriate. If the organisational effectiveness is to be improved through efforts of the organisation's own members a participatory self-assessment process would be most suitable. Regardless of the type of OA, it is important to focus and not to try meeting multiple objectives.

Correspondence

Every assessment tool is a reflection of an organisational vision/theory and related management beliefs. When a certain tool is used, it must be clear that a clear correspondence exists between the assessment method the tool embodies and the culture/strategies of the organisation which is to be assessed. This requires careful study of each tool, in order to clarify the conceptual and methodological underpinnings the tool represents. Essential questions are for example: Who are the key actors in organisational change? Are partnerships regarded as reciprocal? Is change regarded as a continuous growing process starting from the employees or a matter of changing strategy and structure? Is it hierarchical or does it require the participation of teams? Are there distinct stages of development or is growth perceived as a continuous process? Are there incentives for change and if so, what are they?⁸

Partner relationships

An assessment must also consider possible partner relationships in which the organisation is engaged. Decisions on the OA approach, the duration and use of its results must be made together. An assessment process, even self-assessment, can be threatening and may create or uncover conflicts within the organisation if this principle is not respected. In case of a donor – recipient partnership, there may be fear that results will be tied to future funding. If there is mistrust within the organisation to be assessed, the assessment results may not be genuine. Lastly, it is important for the organisation subject to an OA that its partner has gone or is going through an OA itself. This gives a true appreciation of the effort and the risk involved in the process and gives credibility to the claim that assessment is useful and important.

⁸ A very valuable tool is the short but provocative OECD/DAC's Donor Capacity Self-Assessment for organisations supporting capacity strengthening initiatives.

III. HOW DO PSO MEMBERS AND THEIR PARTNERS SEE OA?

III.1 Introduction

The following describes the outcomes of telephone interviews with twenty PSO member organisations. In most cases two interview sessions with each contact person contributed to this final result. For several reasons the results are described in a qualitative way. The diversity among PSO member organisations is enormous and the understanding, the objectives and the use of OA also vary within each individual organisation. It should also be noted that not everyone in the PSO member organisations is engaged in OA exercises. All interviewees were however involved in OA related activities. Their views are reflected in the interviews, but these do not necessarily represent their organisation.

The study, based on qualitative interviews and not on in-depth research, was not equipped to assess the situation within each organisation in quantitative terms. Consequently, the authors use indicative statements to present their findings. In order to honour the richness of the observations and statements of the interviewees, each paragraph will be closed by some quotes.

The results of the interviews are presented in accordance with the points of attention and related questions, which PSO KC and ETC jointly determined.

III.2 Capacity building and OA in the organisation's policy

III.2.1 Familiarity with Organisational Assessment

All interviewed PSO members stated they were familiar with OA. They also have an idea with what purpose OA should be applied. Beyond this general assertion there was little communality between members. On the views about how, why and when OA was to be applied, they showed a strong divergence. Members with a commercial orientation, for example, want to use OA as a tool for measuring the economic viability of a partner organisation, whereas other members with development oriented programmes see OA as a means to start dialoguing with the partner about possible options for the latter's capacity building.

Under the label of OA a wide range of different actions may emerge: from a snapshot with assessment features on the one hand, to a process setting in motion an equal exchange between member and partner on the other. In addition, it appeared that OA strongly depended on the specific characteristics of PSO member organisations and their partners.

'Partners know extremely well which direction they want to go. We must support them in this. Perhaps our advice makes sense, perhaps not. We only like doing an OA if they really want it.' (NIZA)

'Our partners are au fond too small to expose them to OA. Our financial risks are limited, so why all the hassle? Perhaps an OA with a group of partners would make sense.' (CMC)

'When a candidate partner does not have a clear market perspective and the own organisation is not financially and personnelwise transparent either, we cannot afford to engage ourselves in a partner relationship.' (GDF)

III.2.2 The role of OA in the policy of the PSO member organisation

OA proved to have strong support within all interviewed PSO member organisations. This was frequently underlined in the interviews. It was however also stated that the notion of OA only exists 'in the heads' of some working for a member organisation. These persons really work

with the concept. In most cases, however, OA is only partially used, depending on the available time, knowledge and skills a programme officer/relation manager/desk officer⁹ of a PSO member organisation possesses.

In a few cases OA was an integral feature in the regular strategy and planning exercises of PSO member organisations. In these cases OA had to contribute to accommodating the changes in the orientation of their own organisations. Many members struggled however with the difficulty to properly increase their resources needed for appropriate OA exercises.

About a quarter of the interviewed PSO member organisations have explicitly based OA in their strategy and they are active in the further development of alternative OA concepts. In most of the cases the practical implications varied. Due to the lack of experience, means, and time only a limited implementation of their OA policy was considered as feasible.

More often OA was implicitly present in the activities of PSO member organisations, but certainly not encompassing their entire organisation. Besides this, it was concluded that the attention for OA in the organisational policy is increasing: OA elements appear frequently in intake procedures, guidelines for assessing project requests and partner selection. SWOT analyses often appeared to be popular.

'We have just begun with explicitly formulating OA in our policy. Up to now we were strongly engaged in hands-on activities such as installing water pumps and constructing houses. But now the implementation capacity of our partners is more and more becoming the central theme and then it is necessary to know what they are already capable of doing and what they still have to learn.' (DORCAS)

'The only way you can handle OA well in relation to your partners is when you have done a similar exercise in your own club. That experience has taught us a lot and has certainly influenced the way we approach our partners.' (MCNV)

'OA is certainly an important part of our policy. But where do you find good partners in emergency situations? We ourselves are always in a hurry: our own operational focus can therefore be an obstacle for a careful process of organisational strengthening.' (ZOA)

'We have the government as our most important partner. For them everything is fixed in bureaucratic rules and procedures. For this reason we have not thought about OA in an organisation-wide manner as yet. But it is certainly necessary, because we increasingly come across new partners outside the government. We also experience government institutions to be less rigid than we so far assumed.' (Netherlands Leprosy Relief)

'Our partners indicate what their needs are concerning OA. We therefore did not anchor OA explicitly in our policy. We have an open attitude to OA, provided the partners wishes so.' (NIZA)

III.2.3 How do partners look at the OA policy of the PSO member organisations?

Partners' points of view were voiced in the interviews by all interviewed PSO member organisations. In their perception their partners did not always support OA. They frequently referred to a certain distrust among partners: does OA really serve capacity strengthening?

In cases of long member-partner relationships, the question was often posed whether an OA exercise would really be necessary. One might assume sufficient acquaintance with the strengths and weaknesses of those partners: an appeal to get engaged in an OA exercise could therefore easily be seen as a lack of confidence. Some members also wished to be

⁹ The titles of *programme officer*, *relation manager* and *desk officer* relate to the same functions in different organisations. In the following the term 'programme officer' will be used for all three titles.

careful with OA, for fear of the tool not sufficiently taking into account the partner's cultural context.



Only in cases where a gradual and well-considered introduction of OA has taken place, members saw a more positive attitude of their partners towards OA. In such situations partner organisations often show to be proactive in learning to handle the tool. Additionally, OA in those cases appeared to be an important basis for discussion on capacity development.

A number of members emphasised that different interests can play a role, when embarking on a discussion about OA and capacity strengthening. They stated that especially when OA is explicitly established in the PSO member organisation's policy, such an organisation can easily indulge to the urge to take the initiative in a discussion about OA.

'Some of our partners wondered whether OA was really necessary when we were about to start certain of its elements. Didn't we know each other well enough already?' (Kerkinactie)

'The implementation of our policy should be cost effective. That is why we want to know to what extent our partners can guarantee us this. We are responsible for the best use of the funds trusted to us. Our partners surely understand this, but at the same time they find our orientation as a donor a barrier for a good dialogue about capacity strengthening.' (Strohalm)

'Some of our partners considered OA checklists based very much on our own ideas of what an organisation should look like. Such reactions make us question the implementation of our policy. Do we sufficiently take the local organisational traditions and rules into account?' (Mama Cash)

III.2.4 Trust as a basis for an effective OA policy

The quality and openness of the interaction between the member organisation and its partner(s) is crucial for a good understanding and a good application of OA. An open attitude, when looking at the own organisation, as well as an atmosphere of confidence within the organisation are central conditions. This applies to the member organisation as well as its partner(s). The majority of the PSO member organisations think that the question of how to promote the partner's confidence in OA is crucial. When a basis of confidence was established, an OA exercise proved to be stimulating for expanding the member partner relation.



'We sometimes work with partners (family and pioneer companies, farmer cooperatives), where only one person has the say in everything. Those persons often stood at the cradle of their organisation. In such organisations it is often cumbersome to give attention to strengths and weaknesses. They feel resistance against openness and transparency, which OA requires. The message to us was often: "Don't worry about the way we do things. This is the way we function."' (Fair Trade Assistance)

'Is it possible to raise your partner's confidence in OA, when the partner perceives that you yourself have little influence on important decisions in your own organisation?' (VSO)

*'It is all about trust. When our partners know us well, it's easier, regardless of financial constraints.' (NOC*NSF)*

'The partner should be open and ready to be engaged in a joint quest with us.' (Strohalm)

'It is remarkable. First it takes quite some effort to convince the partner of the use of OA. When you succeed in doing so, OA appears an excellent tool to strengthen the basis of trust between you and your partner. And on top of that, partners have more self-confidence to handle the improvement of their own functioning.' (DORCAS)

'OA must not — neither openly nor covertly — be linked to financial consequences for partner organisations.' (Pax Christi)

III.3 Current working situation and required skills

III.3.1 Do certain OA practices/tools enjoy preference?

None of the interviewed had a clear preference for certain OA tools. Emphasis was put on flexible handling, while accommodating the specific circumstances and needs of the partners. A quarter of the interviewees considered themselves as newcomers in the area of OA. They did not dare to make choices yet.

SWOT analyses and different kinds of quick-scan checklists were frequently used. The use of these tools did not stand on its own. In most cases they were the outset for jointly determining the best approaches for partners to strengthen their capacities. This kind of process applied mostly to partners which were responsible for long-term programmes.

Within seven member organisations (ICCO, Tear Fund, GDF, VSO, DORCAS, ZOA and NiZA) new developments for own strategies on OA with accompanying tools were started. According to the interviews, these strategies and tools often appeared not to be known or applied in the entire organisation.

ICCO had to describe its primary processes within the framework of its ISO 9001 certification and in this description, reference was made to the use of OA tools. Jointly with PSO, the organisation facilitated the development of a *facilitator's toolbox* and also initiated an e-learning trajectory for Capacity Assessment & Planning. GDF uses the Modelo Integral de Diagnóstica para Cooperativas (MIDCA), which goes deeper than the IOM presented by MDF. DORCAS developed OA tools based on a series of country-specific impact studies and a strong field organisation structure. ZOA recently established an own knowledge centre for a more systematic approach to OA experiences. Within Tear Fund a tool for Capacity Self-Assessment (CASA) has been developed and within VSO another similar tool, the so-called Participatory Placement Assessment Process (PPAP). In both cases it concerned consistently worked out and tested OA tools with an own timing and terminology. In a Capacity Needs Assessment workshop facilitated by NiZA, different OA tools were used and the partner organisations were actively involved in developing and testing OA tools. The interviewees of

these member organisations commented on the poor participatory character of measurements, as done in most quick-scans.

The OA terminology used appeared to be equivocal. The examples mentioned suggest that OA will always have a participatory character. The interviews suggested that the participatory character of OA was certainly important, but not the only redeeming feature.

A number of member organisations did not have difficulties with a top-down approach for assessing partners, especially when a financial risk was present.

'Each partner cooperation has its own characteristics and dynamics. You cannot just use a standard checklist. The conventional use of an OA scan will make all partners look alike.' (ICCO)

'I find the system of a SWOT analysis clear and structuring. I am aware of the fact that you should have an idea of how to determine strengths and weaknesses. This requires having different instruments.' (Netherlands Red Cross)

'OA is of central interest to partner organisations in their shift to working according to the programme approach.' (ICCO)

'Of course I think the participatory character of OA is important, but at the end of the day I should be able to state what has to be required from a partner for improving its functioning.' (ICCO)

III.3.2 How to match the OA approach to the partner's characteristics

The majority of the interviewed members felt capable to choose the appropriate OA tool. The IOM (Integrated Organisation Model), as presented by MDF was seen as a good framework of orientation, because it was the best-known model. Many programme officers did not consider themselves specialists in the area of OA, and do not wish or expect to be either. They are aware they have good access to more OA sources (also through the PSO website), but they lack the time to really deepen their knowledge on the subject.

'Our entire staff has participated in the MDF OA training offered by PSO. Result: we apply the same concepts. We have adapted the MDF model to the specific situations of our partner organisations. This is a process in progress.' (GDF)

'The OA format provided by us "improves itself" during use, also because we specifically request for suggestions to simplify and improve its use.' (GDF)

'I never use an entire manual, no matter what manual I consider. Manuals serve as a source of inspiration for inventing adaptations as a translation of reality into a model. But beware: reality is complex and oversimplification a danger.' (Netherlands Red Cross)

'The vision and mission of a partner organisation are fundamental aspects of OA. The starting point for many OA exercises is often formulated in terms of organisational structure, whereas in fact a problem of a higher order is at stake.' (TEAR Fund)

III.3.3 How to make good use of experts for carrying out OA

The interviewees considered it important to be able to make the right selection of external OA experts. There was a strong conviction that programme managers of the PSO member

organisations had the capabilities to make a selection. It was however frequently stated there was a serious scarcity of good local experts.

Most of the interviewed said to be able to go quite a way with a good Terms of Reference, briefing and debriefing. The quality of the expert services could also be safeguarded by setting clear requirements to the reporting. However, the internal communication within the member organisation concerning the hiring of experts should be more systematic and intensive.

A part of the member organisations do have a distinct preference for attracting external experts for OA exercises, because of their independence from member organisations' interests, as well as their partners'.

However, member organisations which preferred a strong participatory approach with a focus on internal trust and transparency showed some reluctance to hire external expertise, since the involvement of an external expert could disturb the organisational climate. For others the sheer small size of their partner organisations was simply the argument not to contract external expertise: the high costs would not be justified when related to the benefits.

'OA is a professional competency to develop organisational patterns, to recognise and to see through trends. This competency helps to pose the right questions on the right moment. It also helps organisations to discover what they have in common with others.' (CORDAID)

'There are huge differences between the outcomes of assessments. These can be foreseen when one knows the consultants who handle them. Each expert definitely has their own point of view.' (CORDAID)

III.3.4 How to discuss OA experiences with partners and advise them on OA tools

Most of the member organisations took a modest attitude towards advising their partners. There is little room to start an OA advisory trajectory, because field visits are overloaded (three partner visits per day being no exception). In addition, programme officers do not consider themselves as OA experts. They feel more comfortable when jointly reflecting OA issues with their partners. In specific humanitarian disaster situations the operations of member organisations often form an obstacle to an OA process.

In a number of cases the exchange between partners was promoted and stimulated by PSO, their members or other partners. Exchanges occurred in conferences, an e-learning activity, or by sharing OA material between partners with the intention of discussing this. In one case this way of working proves to be very effective: ten partners have joined to discuss and partially modify the MDF manual on the Integrated Organisation Model. Member organisations themselves have also facilitated the development of OA course material and related OA trainings for partners.

Due to the specific character of the different member-partner relations, it was not possible to detect a consistent pattern in how discussions on OA between the member organisations and their partners were developing. A similar conclusion could be drawn where it concerned providing advice for a better use of OA tools. In this respect it was frequently brought forward that PSO could play an important role in capitalising member organisations' OA experiences (systematic recording and exchanges of cases).

'As a relation manager I should not pretend being an OA expert. This can create confusion, because the partner does not expect me to behave like this. When the partner asks me for an OA advise, I grant this wholeheartedly, but with a certain modesty.' (Kerkinactie).

'We have started organising partner consultations. Apart from the fact that these

consultations tell us a lot about our partners' drives, lively contacts among themselves also start to blossom at the same time.' (Woord en Daad)

III.3.5 How to value an OA process/product in terms of impact

A number of member organisations stated that their involvement in OA was too short for making statements about possible impacts on their partners' capacity. Most interviewees referred however to examples of a positive OA impact on their partner organisations. Impact was often formulated in terms of the quality of the change process that the OA exercise had helped to start. This was hardly the case in humanitarian disaster situations, due to the absence of good partner organisations, or simply due to the lack of time for properly starting a process of capacity development.

Negative impacts of OA were also mentioned. For example: results of an OA exercise were used against a partner operating in a highly politically sensitive environment. Or: a partner-member relationship deteriorated because the member organisation wanted to start an OA exercise too fast.

The majority of the interviewed member organisations had a positive appreciation of their internal mechanisms to value OA processes/products. However, determining the exact quality of OA processes/products was thought to be troublesome. More knowledge based on experience would certainly help, but the identification of quality criteria and procedures for quality assurance were regarded as difficult (what works and what does not). One member organisation had a set of tools for quality assessment.

'We consider an OA experience as useful when it enables the partner to cope with its environment more actively.' (FREEVOICE)

'We have developed a certain feeling for what works and what does not work with partners. Strict quality standards are still lacking, however. Whether the deployment of certified experts can deal with this problem, is a big question for us.' (Kerkinactie)

III.4 Learning within PSO member organisations

III.4.1 Experiences with OA training and OA training needs

All interviewees referred to the 'Training Course Organisational Assessment' delivered by MDF¹⁰. All appreciated this course, whether they were familiar with OA or only getting acquainted with it for the first time. Starters often experienced the training in the OA field as an eye-opener. For the advanced, the training functioned at least as a good refresher. In all interviews it was stated that thinking about OA and actions based on it should take place in a more structured manner.

The Integrated Organisation Model (IOM), as offered in the training, was experienced as useful, but the model was certainly not seen as the only one. It was emphasised that the use of IOM should not be too mechanistic. Some PSO members feared that IOM might result in OA being used too easily as a judging tool only. This also became clear in some of the MDF training sessions with member organisations and partners.

In a number of cases, mention was made of other OA training experiences. Some member organisations had organised internal training sessions on OA. Many interviewed members appreciated PSO's facilitating of the MDF OA trainings as a good starting point for a

¹⁰ Three-day Training Course Organisational Assessment, 2003 & 2004, MDF Training & Consultancy

continued OA learning trajectory; PSO's website was considered useful, but only some consulted it regularly.

All interviewees indicated it was important to learn more about OA. They reiterated this interest in meetings with PSO. After further questioning it became clear that the concrete learning needs of the PSO members were very diverse. Some wanted to be more acquainted with more tools, others wished to have more exchange between members concerning practical situations. Not only persons should learn about OA, but their organisations as well. Classifying member organisations according to their level of OA knowledge and experience (starters-growers-advanced; see Annex II) was considered, after some initial resistance, very suitable for designing parallel OA learning trajectories.

'Sometimes I did not know whether the MDF course was meant for the self-assessment of the member organisation or for the partners.' (NiZA)

'People from member organisations should not feel attacked by the classification of starter, grower, or advanced. We should not consider our members as a school class, with smart numbers and the less talented. It is much better to take advantage of the differences in OA knowledge and experience. The advanced can learn from each other, but so can starters and growers.' (MCNV)

III.4.2 Reflection on OA processes and registering experiences

Within most member organisations reflection on OA takes place. It was frequently stated however that a systematic internal exchange on the subject was lacking. Aspects of OA are regularly touched upon either in project committees or in staff meetings, before taking decisions on project/programme proposals. While assessing the proposals certain criteria are used, but a systematic discussion about their application is often absent. Too little attention was given to knowledge management in the service of OA. It was commonly confirmed that the attention for OA has increased within the member organisations.

The majority of the member organisations underlined the interest of OA for the own organisation, apart from the orientation of their partners. An OA exercise executed in the own organisation was considered as stimulating for exchanging more OA experiences with partners. No unambiguous image existed on the nature of these exchanges, because every PSO member very much had its own specific relationship with its partner organisations.

'We have reserved specific capacity for knowledge management. It too often appeared that too little was learned from valuable experiences. Others in our organisation did not have access to them.' (ZOA)

'What can colleague PSO members learn from us? We work in such a specific context that I wonder whether experiences can teach others something. Perhaps member organisations from related areas should be brought together in order for them to exchange experience concerning partner relations.' (DORCAS)

III.5 Joint learning about OA with other member organisations

Nearly all interviewed member organisations were eager to participate in practice oriented exchanges with other members. They strongly emphasised an open attitude in relation to each other in such exchanges. A careful look at which member organisations could best cooperate was also considered important. The classification starter/grower/advanced may be functional for clustering member organisations in possible joint learning trajectories, but certainly not on its own. The similar scales of member organisations, as well as their specific

orientation on certain target groups/activities were mentioned as leading principles for clustering. The small scale of some member organisations may however play a negative role when not enough people can be made available for knowledge and experience exchanges.

The member organisations did not have the same opinion about the use of a web based OA discussion. Such exchange would be too time consuming over a long period and could therefore easily become a voluntary exercise. A number of members much more preferred face-to-face contact (e.g. in a seminar or workshop).

The systematic bundling of OA information on the PSO Knowledge Centre website was found useful. Several times it was mentioned that a web based discussion would facilitate involving partner organisations in an exchange on practices. Due to the preference of the member organisations for face-to-face contacts at this point of time, the web based discussion was postponed until later.

'Of course, we should give OA more systematic attention in our own organisation, but it must not be an obstacle for exchanges with other PSO members. It is good to look into each other's kitchens.' (ZOA)

'I am eager to sit around the table with the other smaller Christian organisations. We really do have much in common with respect to the approach of our partners. As organisations, we can learn a lot from each other.' (CMC)



IV. HOW DO RESOURCE PERSONS OUTSIDE OF PSO LOOK AT OA?

IV.1 Introduction

Ten resource persons in the field of organisation, management training and advice were interviewed. They work for organisations operating in the field of development cooperation, with expertise on OA. In addition, four persons related to different organisations, working for governmental institutions and the corporate sector were interviewed. The reason to interview these resource persons was to get a broader view on the different aspects of OA. Partner organisations and local consultants with experience in OA were not yet consulted, because PSO and the member organisations wished to start the reflection on OA amongst themselves.

IV.2 Resource persons' statements

IV.2.1 What is meant by Organisational Assessment?

None of the interviewees had a fixed definition of OA. But all referred to OA as a recurring activity to follow developments within organisations. It concerns a short and quick analysis of a partner organisation's key elements for the execution of its mission. The type of partner organisation and its context determines how to execute the OA exercise. OA is sometimes called Institutional Assessment, Organisational Diagnosis, or Institutional Analysis. All concepts mainly refer to the same practice of providing a clear view on an organisation's strengths and weaknesses within the framework of its objectives.

The use of checklists may be useful for taking stock of a certain organisational situation that can indicate steps for a trajectory of organisational development. The reason to do an OA exercise can stem from the wish to determine whether a satisfactory relation exists between inputs (market orientation, financing, personnel assistance) and outputs (results).

IV.2.2 What is the place of OA in organisational development?

OA is an important precondition for organisational development. However, it should first be clear what the primary motive is for a process of organisational development: is it the ambition of the organisation, are there internal frictions, or are reorganisations/mergers to take place? Based on such central problem analysis, a phased planning can be developed. OA as a diagnostic activity (at the outset or during the process) thus has a clear place within the process of organisational development. This process aims at being an advancing process of knowledge and experience acquisition. The context (including the external networks), in which the organisation functions, is of equal importance as the internal process. OA should thus be followed by a closer attention to development/management of partnerships.

IV.2.3 Are certain OA tools preferable?

None of the interviewees expressed a distinct preference for certain OA tools. The context in which member organisations and partner organisations operate determines which tools can be best applied. MDF's Integrated Organisation Model (IOM) permits a flexible application of OA tools, but this also applies to other theoretical frameworks.

Checklists may work, but open interviews, focus interviews, appreciative inquiries or discussion techniques can also be appropriate depending on the situation. According to the interviewees, Organisational Strengthening/Institutional Development (OS/ID) tools were sometimes preferred, instead of OA tools, in which auto-diagnostics and empowerment are important elements. Such an approach can however produce a tense relation with the Logical Framework approach, which donors frequently require.

The common opinion was to not consider OA tools as simple tricks. It was often observed that the advantages and disadvantages of OA tools were not sufficiently taken into consideration in an unbiased way. Some of the interviewees stated that OA tools are often too easily and prematurely rejected as culturally irrelevant and too Western. According to the resource persons, the choice for OA tools could depend on e.g. a central issue (new market approach), an important theme (organisational underperformance), or an outspoken interest (reorientation of a partner organisation). The usefulness of OA tools for the self-assessment by (partner) organisations was frequently emphasised.



IV.2.4 What are the conditions for applying OA?

Basic questions before starting an adequate OA exercise are: is the partner organisation open to cooperation with those who proposing an OA? Is there a willingness to learn? Is there an interest in the functioning of the partner's own organisation? Is there enough ownership of what the partner is striving for? Who will pay for OA and the process of implementing the recommendations afterwards? Will the commitment to OA exercises be regularly assessed?

An absolute precondition for a good OA is that the internal organisational structures of the PSO member organisation and the partner are transparent. A climate of mutual trust is important as well. Additionally, the active support of the management staff of both is essential, as well as confidence in the OA tools and the expert involved in the OA exercise.

Professional expertise for choosing the right experts is a must. In this respect it is very useful to have been exposed to an OA exercise oneself, which is better guaranteed when OA is embedded in the policy of the organisation (as in the case of some PSO member organisations). Adequate training facilities for local facilitators are badly needed, apart from clarity on when and how to mobilise external expertise. External expertise remains much needed, as long as PSO member organisations also function as donor organisations.

IV.2.5 What skills does OA require?

OA demands for rational-analytic skills. Apart from a sound theoretical basis in organisational theory, a broad range of (inter)personal and strong moderator skills are required (chairing, process guidance, listening, posing questions), according to the interviewees. An open unbiased attitude, combined with sensibility for varying cultural contexts were seen as essential, as well as the ability to create trust. Specific technical knowledge was considered of secondary interest. One interviewee mentioned a clear gender orientation in OA as an important OA skill. Others referred to the advisory skills formulated within the framework of a code of conduct for advisors.¹¹

¹¹ Code of Conduct Ooa (Orde van organisatiekundigen en -adviseurs) & ROA (Raad van Organisatie-Adviesbureaus), established by Ooa and ROA.

IV.2.6 What impact does OA have on the capacity of organisations?

According to the resource persons, the process following a diagnosis is much more important than the diagnosis itself. Much can be learned from earlier organisational change processes in similar situations. Quantitative OA tools often proved to provoke discussions about the need for organisational changes without exposing persons to criticism for having made certain statements.

Some resource persons put more stress on the process of accompanied organisational strengthening than the initial OA as a starting point. Impact was then measured in terms of the acquisition of the appropriate power to achieve the organisational goals.



In some other cases OA has led to more distance between partners. In these cases, managerial issues often played a role. OA was only seen as a means of control and appeared to have a negative impact. Other experiences with impact were less clear, especially for the resource persons who provided OA training, but not directly involved in OA exercises.

IV.2.7 How can OA be learned?

Most interviewees stated that self-study, combined with experience learning and practical exchanges are good ingredients for OA learning. They often referred to intervention and coaching (master-apprentice relation). One resource person mentioned very concrete training needs: a course for basic skills regarding the elaboration of a Terms of Reference and the assessment of experts' CVs.

Most interviewees regarded the model of a joint learning process with a partner as an important learning option; external expertise can play a supporting role here.

Some interviewees focused on the question of how OA can be learned organisation-wide. The size of the organisation was found important in this respect. They referred to large, middle-sized and small PSO member organisations.¹² The large ones are bureaucratically organised. In these organisations the gap between policy and implementation is wide. OA trainings had little or no impact on their policies. The interviewees in question were of the opinion that those organisations could not be regarded as learning from OA.

The middle-sized member organisations appeared to take most advantage from OA trainings, because the distance between the trainings and the application of the learned content was small. In these cases the outcomes of OA exercises and trainings as a helping hand in strategy discussions were accepted relatively easily. These organisations had better conditions for OA learning than their larger counterparts. Smaller member organisations possess too little human resources to structurally dedicate enough time to OA and thus to learn about OA.

¹² The interviewees did not indicate the size of the organisations, but the interviews suggested the following: small organisation = 1 to 10 persons; middle-sized organisation = 11 to 50 persons; large organisation = 50 plus.

IV.2.8 How should professional exchange of OA experience take place?

Exchanges can very well take place within the framework of the facilitator-client relationship. This also applies to PSO and its members as clients. The question is also to what extent PSO considers itself an organisation defending the interests of its members and whether the organisation's character is more hybrid (functioning as a donor, and as a service organisation/knowledge centre for its members). According to some resource persons PSO should preferably aim itself on middle-sized member organisations, because these organisations are best capable of OA learning.

Exchanges should take place on the basis of practical cases. This often applies to professional working in the world of commercial advisors: peer feedback and peer reviews are part of their professional practice. Exchanges between advisors of different companies working on a similar kind of assignment is common practice (sparring with colleagues).

Seminars and workshops of a more general character are also important to keep up with new developments and the maintaining/expansion of networks. Exchanges between commercial organisation advisors have their limitations according to some resource persons, because they work in a competing market, which makes revealing new approaches less probable. The other interviewees however did not perceive such limitations.

IV.2.9 How should the quality of OA be safeguarded?

Some large member and resource organisations are certified (ISO 9001:2000; orientation on description of processes in quality handbook; client orientation). This does not specifically concern OA practices. Within other member organisations quality assurance mechanisms are present (peer reviews, intensive client contacts), but OA is still too new for a specific position herein.

OA quality can very well be guarded by following distinct OA activities in organisational development processes. Standard milestones (benchmarks) were seen as less appropriate than different methods for organisational development under license (licensed methods). On occasion, it was stated that licensed methods can work, but that a clear consciousness about their limitations is required.

Some resource persons were of the opinion that the quality of OA is very well guarded when OA quality indicators are jointly determined by Northern NGOs and their Southern partners. There often exists a tension between the interpretations of OA quality standards of both parties. Another mechanism for quality assurance is feedback about the application of OA tools via knowledge networks (through Impact Alliance, for example) and internal training trajectories.

For some resource persons quality guarantees should be sought in a clear terms of reference for an OA exercise and a briefing/debriefing to/by the expert. The expert being certified does not qualify as an argument in favour of their selection.

Hence there are no standard solutions for differing situations. The description of the internal organisational processes, as required for ISO 9001:2000, may be very helpful, but does not supply enough points of reference for an OA quality assessment. Clients may sometimes require certification or at least appreciate it. Certification can thus be seen as a marketing tool.

V CONCLUSIONS: WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THE INTERVIEWS?

V.1 Introduction

The results of the interviews presented in the previous chapters provide a qualitative overview of the application of OA by PSO member organisations and what these organisations and other development cooperation-related experts regard as crucial issues in using OA. The results also provide an indication of the content and design of a learning process for PSO member organisations. This final conclusive chapter discusses eight themes. Covering the most important lessons, they should be regarded as relevant for the design of a follow-up on the current PSO learning trajectory.

V.2 OA: Moment or process; assessing or developing?

Although none of the interviewees could give a strict definition of OA, there was a common consciousness as to what OA is about: OA entails creating a situation in which participants take a step back and reflect on the functioning of an organisation. The required time frame and the different ways of doing this were less clear: PSO members associated OA both with the start of a partner relation and with the start of a process of capacity building, as well as with the quality of the process itself. The phrase 'associate with', however, does not mean that OA should be seen as being identical to capacity building or to developing a partner relation.

In this document OA is seen as a tool which is related either to taking stock of a situation in an organisation, or to reflect upon it. The objectives and the context of an OA exercise may vary significantly. For example: OA may amount to making a quick judgement of an organisation, OA may be the start-up of an expanded partner relation, or OA may support from time to time the process of capacity building over a long period.

The application and execution of OA cover thus a wide range of different activities. One can think of short interviews with a partner organisation, of socialising with persons working for the partner organisation, or of regular consultations with the partner organisation. These activities are not yet focused on capacity building as such, like the decision-making, planning, or realisation of certain changes in the organisation. Hence, OA and capacity building are strongly related to each other, but they are not the same.

In the interviews was repeatedly stated that communication, interaction, trust, respect and reciprocity are key factors in the development of partner relations. These factors form also the very basis without which a good OA would not be possible. Again: there is a strong relationship with OA, but here counts as well: they are not the same as OA.

OA can be regarded as an activity geared to make an assessment of a (potential) partner on the short term. However, OA is fairly often regarded as a distinct activity imbedded in a long-term process of capacity building or of partner relation strengthening. Whatever meaning is given to OA, the PSO OA learning trajectory will benefit the most from a continued focus on OA as a particular tool with many different faces and possible applications.

V.3 Functionality and dependence

Compared to the lack of clarity about the time span OA should cover, more clarity existed about its functionality: OA was always considered to assess organisational functioning. Nevertheless, the objectives could differ from e.g. partner selection to assessing a partner's progress, and to structuring the cooperation between partner and PSO member organisation. In the above examples the functional modality of OA implies an unequal relationship between the member organisation and the partner: the partner should fit within the framework defined by the member organisation, similar to what is often done in logical frameworks (in the case of

donor-funded activities) or in economical viability tests (in the case of commercial partnerships).

In the interviews frequent mention was made of inequality and/or dependency in member-partner relations. A considerable number of PSO member organisations found it difficult to combine the role of donor with the role of an accompanying agency. In such dependent relationships the partner has the choice of complying to or oppose the requirements of the PSO member organisation. Both reactions are obstacles to a constructive development of the member-partner relation: either the partner becomes frustrated by not being heard, or the partner risks provoking antagonistic feelings from the member organisation.

It is thus very important to address questions regarding the power characteristics of all concrete partner relations before starting an OA exercise. This should happen in an atmosphere of mutual respect and should honour each party's position. Only then can the responsibilities of each party within the framework of a partner relation be clearly defined.

It is therefore recommended to first state how the member organisation and its partner perceive their relation in terms of position, equality/dependence and responsibilities. Only then can a choice for OA be made in an atmosphere of mutual respect. When both endorse the need for such an exercise, they can determine its objective and form.

V.4 Content: only tailor-made OA solutions possible?

In the interviews respondents gave examples of OA tools and the ways they could be applied. Some of those tools were complex and detailed systems of analysis and were appreciated for their comprehensiveness. It is therefore remarkable that enthusiastic descriptions of OA tools coincided with their contextual relativity: different situations always required context-specific adaptations. The general message was that standard tools could not be applied in differing situations and that good OA exercises could only be the result of a tailor-made application of OA tools.

Not many suggestions were given in the interviews on how to make existing OA tools more context-relevant. The fact that very frequently a plea was made for exchanges regarding OA practices, does suggest that the making OA tools context-relevant is not an easy task.



Contrary to the resource persons, whose job it is to perform OA exercises, the interviewees of the PSO member organisations generally did not possess in-depth knowledge about OA. Both groups did however emphasised the issue of context dependency of OA tools, to such an extent that they appeared to be in the same situation of being forced to adapt approaches and tools to the specific needs and requirements of each new situation. In addition, the existence of various terminologies, methods, and theories was also a factor in their (negative) judgement on the general applicability of OA tools.

The distinction between the generic and context dependent elements of OA is a difficult issue. This is not surprising since in the field of capacity building, management of complex decision-making processes or organisational change processes, no defined set of tools appears to provide an unambiguous one-for-all answer. Instead, OA facilitators make use of toolkits and adapt them to the specific context and objective. Only at a rather abstract level can the context and the choice of tools be related to each other.

For a better understanding of the (different) relations between context and the use of OA tools, a continuous learning environment is required. The skill of defining a true tailor-made approach might for example be improved in exchanges on OA practices between PSO members and partners. In these exchanges learning about and an exposure to different contexts is essential. One way of doing this is jointly discussing cases with contrasting contexts in which similar OA tools were applied, or by jointly studying comparative analysis about the same. These exercises can contribute to a better understanding of the relation between the circumstances, the effectiveness and the feasibility of different OA applications, and improve tailor-made solutions.

V.5 Professional competency

It is understandable that in the light of the above, much emphasis was put on the individual expert's professional OA competency. This competency is mostly based on the ability to design one's own set of tools (or: to invent one's own language), that is most suitable in the prevailing context. The question is who should possess such a competency. The fact that PSO started a learning trajectory on OA suggests that its members should have at least a certain minimal level of in-house knowledge on OA. PSO also provides funds to its members for more specific external OA expertise, but it is not clear whether the members' in-house knowledge should become more in-depth in the future.

Up to now, PSO considered the competency question as to what extent OA has been anchored within the policy of the member organisations. Whether integration in policy will lead to the anchoring of the competency itself is another question. In the interviews the implications of such a policy for, for example, job profiles of staff members working directly with partner organisations were rarely mentioned, nor was there much mention of the training requirements related to these competencies and job profiles.

Member organisations should make an analysis of who is available within the organisation as OA expert(s) and who can possibly be trained as such. In addition, the involvement of external experts in OA activities should still be taken into account. For these aspects every member organisation should design its own training framework. The outcomes of those internal analyses and designs are essential for an effective continuation of the OA learning trajectory.

V.6 PSO and Organisational OA Learning

The interviewees of the member organisations broadly acknowledged the necessity to anchor OA in the PSO member organisation's policy. The anchoring has already taken place in some member organisations, while other members are in the process of making arrangements. The question is what such intentions mean in concrete terms. The interviews referred to the necessity for clear rules regarding partner selection and partner guidance. Additionally, the internal exchanges on OA should be organised in a more intensive and systematic way. And finally, project staff should be better acquainted with OA. The fact that a total of 128 staff members from different PSO members have followed the MDF course, thus appears to have good reason.

It was however remarkable that only a few member organisations considered more OA training as the most appropriate continuation of the OA learning trajectory. Much more emphasis was put on experience learning, such as exposure to OA before doing the exercise by oneself, or exchanges about practical cases brought up by partners or observing what other member organisations are doing through in-house efforts. In all these cases exchange seems to be the buzzword. It is therefore understandable that OA learning was often associated with intervision and coaching (also named as master-apprentice cooperation, or cooperating foremanship) as important learning activities.



In the interviews the size and the complexity of member organisations were brought up as important factors in organisational learning on OA. Size and complexity are however not the only factors determining organisational learning on OA. Other factors, like for example the organisation members' openness, the management's attitude, and the availability of resources for learning were less clearly stipulated in the interviews, but they are equally important.

The factors influencing organisational learning on OA differ considerably per member organisation. Each of them has or will need its own approach to OA learning. The contributions of PSO herein as learning facilitator and knowledge broker were very much appreciated by the member organisations. They warmly welcomed further active support to their internal OA learning processes. The members did however not have clear expectations about what PSO's role could further be in this.

The need for an own OA learning approach and the lack of clear expectations about PSO's role in OA learning induce the question what PSO should do for its member organisations in the field of organisational learning on OA. Should the Knowledge Centre mainly facilitate learning processes and broker knowledge on OA? Or should the Knowledge Centre also take on the roles of researcher or consultant itself?

PSO member organisations' differing sizes and levels of knowledge about and experience with OA call for different learning routes. Member organisations agree to a large extent on the necessity of experience-based learning concerning OA. PSO could initiate, stimulate, and support internal learning trajectories (within a member organisation) and common learning trajectories (between member organisations). PSO's role in these activities (PSO as learning facilitator / knowledge broker, as researcher or as consultant?) needs further reflection.

V.7 OA-related interactions

For an OA exercise to be successful, an atmosphere of trust and openness is required within or between organisations. Additionally, there should be confidence in the OA tools, as well as in the professional giving shape to their execution. It often appears difficult to comply with all these conditions at the same time, which makes creating a good starting point for a successful OA exercise not an easy act. The quality of the existing interaction between the member organisation and the partner is a determining factor herein. It should be based on

integrity, competence, mutual confidence and the ability of both sides to cope with new circumstances respectfully and flexibly.

OA-related interactions can have a circular character: for the realisation of the quality of interaction for an OA exercise, an OA itself can be a very useful instrument. When a first OA is successful, those following this first may very well strengthen the relation between member and partner. In case this first step is not successful, obstacles against a good OA start will probably pile up. Dealing with this paradox, i.e. how to get started with a good OA exercise was not systematically recorded by the members.

An in-depth reflection on the specific requirements for good interaction between the member organisation and the partner is required. However, it should not remain at that level, because it may well be possible that elements in the interaction not geared to capacity strengthening of the partner will put up barriers for a good OA exercise.

V.8 Quality

The interviewees underlined the importance of having quality assurance criteria and mechanisms in place in order to guarantee good OA exercises. Most of them however struggled to provide a clear definition of OA quality. They appeared to rely much on procedural requirements guiding the selection and the work of external experts (in terms of reference, briefing, debriefing) and not much on criteria related to the content of OA. This is consistent with the earlier mentioned strong emphasis on context-relevance of OA exercises and the related use of adapted tools.

All concrete elements which could make OA quality explicit (like benchmarks, standardised methods, licensed approaches, protocols) were considered as not context-relevant. They were mostly rejected for their unilateral character. For this reason there was hardly any recording of the quality aspects of OA, in spite of the broadly existing consciousness about the need for good quality OA exercises.

The distrust of 'too easy' OA quality measurements is understandable, but at the same time complicates matters. It makes the determination of OA quality a thorny issue: in theory good and bad practices could be difficult to distinguish from each other. The interviewees however shared the consciousness that good and bad cases could be identified, as they felt well able to select good external experts. Quality criteria were thus applied, but not made sufficiently explicit at the same time.

Making quality criteria explicit can start from different angles: one can become clearer about the generic OA elements and detect quality aspects from those, and one can embark on a process in which members and partners jointly define quality criteria that are specifically applicable to their partner relations.

It is therefore of great importance that members and partners jointly make the quality criteria for OA explicit for each partner relation. These criteria can be compared with each other in order to deduce which generic quality elements are linked to OA. Only with such generic elements is it possible to identify and to describe best practices in OA.

V.9 'Keep it simple' and 'Easy does it'

Reflections on OA tools and practices refer to a myriad of possible approaches, elements, or points of view. This can complicate discussions between member organisations and partners tremendously and easily stand in the way of finding appropriate solutions. Due to the fact that

so many views and theories on OA exist, as well as OA tools, one easily gets the impression that OA is insurmountably complex, thus losing sight on field situations that are not that complicated.

The adages *Keep it simple* and *Easy does it* are thus very appropriate in order to stay focused, when a concrete OA exercise is forthcoming. They are not meant to simplify situations, but they should be seen as a strong appeal not to make OA per definition an intricate matter either.

The same adages are also applicable for the structuring of an OA learning trajectory, whatever learning model one may refer to¹³. Applying those adages in the design of an OA learning trajectory would certainly require an active and practice-oriented role of PSO members in experience learning and exchanges on OA practices.

'Keep it simple' and 'Easy does it' refer to an attitude towards practising OA, instead of being considered as conceptual principles. The complex environments in which PSO, its members and partners are functioning, cause those involved in OA to easily overlook uncomplicated but effective approaches. The same counts for designing an OA learning trajectory.

¹³ PSO used the learning models as described in *The Organizational Learning Cycle: How We Can Learn Collectively* by Nancy M. Dixon (1994) and 'David A. Kolb on experimental learning' in the encyclopaedia of informal education by M.K. Smith (2001), for structuring the various learning trajectories the organisation offers to its member organisations

Annex I

Interviewees

PSO members	Contact persons
CMC	Frank van Eenbergen
Cordaid	Jose Ruijter
Dorcas Aid	Cees Oosterhuis
International Dutch Red Cross Society	Henk Tukker
Fair Trade Assistance	Marjoleine Motz
FREEVOICE	Kenneth van Toll
Green Development Foundation	Rodney Nikkels
ICCO	Herman Brouwer
ICCO	Angelica Senders
Kerkinactie	Gerrit de Vries
Mama Cash	Nancy Jouwe
Medisch Comité Nederland Vietnam	Willie Rückert, Pamela Wright
Nederlands Instituut voor Zuidelijk Afrika	Bas Zwiers
Netherlands Leprosy Relief	Daan Ponsteen
NOC*NSF	Marije Dippel
Pax Christi	Gemma Claessen
Strohalm	Peter Moers
Tear Fund	Caspar Waalewijn
VSO	Karin de Graaf
Woord en Daad	Leen Stok
ZOA-Vluchtelingenzorg	Kor van der Helm, Arjan Luijer

Resource Persons	Contact persons
Organisation Advisory Services and Training	
MDF - Training and Consultancy	Jan Bruinsma, Niek Bakker
SNV - Netherlands Development Organisation	Robin van Kippersluis
ROI - Training, Coaching and Advise for the Public Sector	Angela Kwok (ex - Beerenschot)
Kwintessence – Independent Advisor in Development Cooperation	Jolanda Peeters (ex - Ernest & Young)
Jouwert van Geene – Independent Organisation	Domien Bruinsma
Advisor on Organisational Assessment Tools	Jouwert van Geene
ATOL - Information Brokering and Knowledge Management	Caroo Torfs
FNV Mondiaal – Netherlands Trade Union Confederation	Wilma Roos
AO - Advisors for Organisation Work	Renger Afman (ex - Ernst & Young – former Moret & Limperg – and Nederlandsche Bank)
Frank Backer BV - Independent Organisation	Frank Backer
Advisor on strategy, organisational development and performance management.	

Annex II

Features Knowledge / Experience Profiles and Related Possible Learning Activities

<i>Starter</i>	<i>Grower</i>	<i>Advanced</i>
<p><u>Features</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Recognises interest of OA in professional work – No or little experience with OA – In search for most appropriate OA-tools – Aiming at better global choices between OA tools <p><u>Possible learning activities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Acquisition theoretical framework regarding organisations (organisation theories) – Enriching tool box (measuring instruments and examples) – Learning better pondering (work actively with cases, OA aspects in role plays) 	<p><u>Features</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Has experience with /or feeling for OA – Wishes content wise deepening of knowledge or improvement of OA skills – Looks for improving of own skills and/or wants to develop-adapt own style <p><u>Possible learning activities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Goal oriented and well framed OA courses – trainings – workshops – Observation of practice situations in other organisations – Coaching 	<p><u>Features</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Possesses yet much experience with and/or feeling for OA – Knows where to look for getting answers on learning questions – Seeks especially support for specific difficult issues <p><u>Possible learning activities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Wishes to slake on high level at other advanced in a focused manner – Exchange of practice situations with feedback (carrying out OA oneself in other organisation / having other OA done in own organisations) – Intervision

Annex III

Summary of the report by Hettie Walters

Given at the PSO Organisational Assessment Day on 28 April 2005

Hettie Walters has worked for the Socio-Economic department at IAC for the last 2½ years. Previously she was a partner at the Gender and Development Training Centre and worked as a gender specialist for SNV. The introduction to an organisation of something like a gender policy essentially boils down to a process of organisational change. This fact stimulated Hettie's interest in the further expansion of knowledge in this field, which led to a Master's programme at the TIAS Management of Learning and Development in Organisations.

Some comments on the paper The Practice of Organisational Assessment

- The paper 'The Practice of Organisational Assessment' includes many different levels: organisational assessment by whom, for whom, for which purpose, with whom
- Does organisational assessment include the organisational network as well as institutional aspects?
- Steps in the process:
 - First identify the purpose. Is it: financial or administrative viability, capacity to execute programmes, learning capacity or the culture of the organisation?
 - Determine responsibilities, duties, rights. Who is it for?
 - Choose the approach/ methodology: participatory, self-organised, expert approach, short, quick (and dirty) or long learning approach
 - Choose the tool checklists, adapt the tools
- Organisational assessment is different to an external control: Therefore organisational assessment should be for the benefit of the organisation that is the subject of the OA. The perceived need of the (partner) organisation must be established; they need to know their objectives, purpose and intentions for embarking on an OA path.
- In hierarchical organisations with low internal trust levels it is very difficult to do a participatory organisational assessment. People will not be rewarded for hanging out their dirty laundry. And it's also practically impossible for them to openly contradict superiors. Methods need to be adapted and it all comes back to the question of why and for whom the OA is being undertaken.
- I didn't see the logic of an OA policy as was mentioned in the paper.
- Organisational Assessment as one aspect of an organisational learning policy is a possibility.
- There is some confusion in the paragraph on the quality of OA (IV.2.9): is it related to assuring the quality of OA or is it referring to using quality management methodologies as OA? I think that some of the methodologies developed in the context of quality management like the EFQM and the INK models can be used in combination with some more participatory OA/ OL tools to help organisations to start thinking and reflecting on their organisational functioning. For the quality of OA itself I think we can use the same questions that we use in any kind of evaluation: was the OA (approach, methods, etc) relevant, was it done efficiently, was it effective (did it give results that are commensurate with the objectives), did it give sustainable results (were strengths and weaknesses identified, are improvements identified and a change/ learning process started with a clear trajectory)
- In her book *The organisational learning cycle; How we can learn effectively*, Nancy Dixon identifies 4 phases of the organisational learning cycle that resemble Kolb's adult learning cycle but also differ slightly: 1. Widespread generation of information; 2. Integrate new/ local information into the organisational context; 3. Collectively interpret the information; authority to take action on the interpreted meaning.
- Three core values that enhance collective interpretation (also during OA)
 - freedom: to speak openly without fear of punishment or coercion,
 - equality which must exist for freedom to exist
 - respect which must be present for equality to exist

Summary of the paper by Suzanne Boomsma

Given at the PSO Organisational Assessment Day on 28 April 2005

Suzanne Boomsma has a background in medicine and business administration and has 15 years' experience in the healthcare sector. For the last seven years she has worked in the area of organisational development processes, on secondment from the Erasmus University, Centre for Healthcare Management Development (Erasmus CMDz). In recent years, she has focused on heading programmes in the area of public healthcare (area health authorities, juvenile healthcare). Boomsma is currently conducting doctoral research into the development of the identity of area health authorities.

Foreword: I am not familiar with international development cooperation (apart from being a member of HealthNet International), but I do have experience with organisational development. In this report, I will attempt to offer a fresh perspective on OA.

Dilemmas:

OA is presented as a good tool for PSO members to assess a (southern) partner (like a SWOT analysis). At the same time, people want to use OA as a learning tool for building the capacity of these partners. Can these two approaches be reconciled?

In any case it starts with everyone being well aware of this double role played by every PSO member:

- the expert role for analysing the partner and supporting capacity building
- the process role for initiating and supervising partners' learning processes geared to emancipation and self-reliance

These two roles can also be detected at PSO itself (financier and learning facilitator).

In addition, I sense that there is a need here to move from expert role to process role. At the moment, this transformation is primarily required by donors/ministries as a condition for approving subsidies. But is this also what the partners involved want? And can and will the PSO members in question use the OA instrument as such?

Organisational development:

PSO presents itself with a logo: a stone cast into water, sending out concentric ripples. A metaphor for the (unexpected) effects of learning intended to be seen in the context of a larger network. Based on people. People who can stand on their own two feet. Which emphasises the role of the process.

I feel that the report lacks a number of principles that are vital in the transformation from expert to process facilitator. It concerns the organisational development of PSO members themselves, in which respect I would like to make a number of comments.

- To learn/emancipate (as the previous speaker so eloquently put it), we need ownership, or a need to learn on the part of partners. A need (formulated top-down) expressed by the financiers is not sufficient. The need of partners/target groups must be the starting point. In modern terms: demand-steering or marketing thinking.
- The relationship between southern partners and northern development organisations is per definition unequal due to financial dependence. How can confidence and challenge be injected into the relationship, creating room to learn? I've read the word 'trust' so many times in the report. So it's clearly a critical success factor. Looking at the relationship, it's about clear positioning: how does the development organisation/PSO member see the partner? What view of people is used?
 - * Is your attitude one of a *bank* assessing the credit worthiness of a partner? And where the bank wishes to keep any financial risk to a minimum?
 - * Is your attitude one of a *doctor* assessing whether the partner is well or sick? And which illness the partner should be cured of as soon as possible?
 - * Is your attitude one of a *teacher* wanting to develop the partner's potential (light the fire)? that will take time.

- * Is your attitude mainly one of *coach*, who guides the partner through its search/development process?
It is important to identify your own attitude and to expand or change it if necessary.
 - The report also often mentions the complicated context of development cooperation: the considerable distance, a large amount of contact by e-mail, diverse political and cultural constellations. I take a different view: every organisation (even in the healthcare sector in The Netherlands) feels that it functions in a complicated context. The point is whether the organisation focuses on the right aspects. Makes choices. According to Boulding's system hierarchy, in his social context, man is the most complex system known to us. To realise changes in such a system, basic questions are necessary. Questions relating to self-awareness and justification (mission, vision and culture). Developing partners' organisations can also begin with questions such as: what is your overall objective? What is your reason for existence? What is your contribution to society? The binding factor is the part that each one of you plays in reducing poverty, and this will also motivate the partners. The danger of the OA instrument is that these essential focusing questions are no longer dealt with.
 - For each partner, it is important to make a distinction between the current organisation and the developing organisation.
 - * The current organisation is based on good agreements, good management and balanced budget: risk management.
 - * The developing organisation is based on setting conditions and a time frame (such as a PSO day) to set a learning process in motion. This primarily involves changing mental attitudes.
- The OA instrument should develop a separate range of instruments for both types of organisations.

Two learning trajectories for PSO and its members:

The OA instrument as it is currently presented can also be used as an organisational development tool by the organisation itself: practice what you preach. To teach others (capacity building) you must also be aware of how learning processes evolve: when does the stone set off the right ripples and when doesn't it? Learning processes have a dynamic and laws of their own. The best way to learn is by examining one's own situation: reflecting on one's own strengths and weaknesses and on 'learning'. In small intervention groups consisting of PSO members with a comparable level of organisational and learning needs. The OA instrument can then be used in two ways:

1. To evaluate how the OA tool is used by partners:
To develop a clinical view (like a medical trainee: see many patients): What view of people is applied? When and why is it used? Form of knowledge management. This also helps to refine the OA instrument itself.
2. As part of an audit to look behind the scenes at each other's organisations, in duos: to gain a sense of your own organisation's learning effects and to develop a learning mentality. The emphasis is on the relational aspect and on the context of development cooperation. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

Emotions such as fear of the unknown also accompany learning and amending opinions. To conquer this, people must have a sense of need, an overall perspective and someone to turn to in uncertain times. Like Moses in the bible, who was forced to flee to the desert (because his involvement with the Israelites had resulted in his murdering an Egyptian) where, on Mount Sinai, he had a vision of the Israelites' promised land and, to help him with his speech impediment, his brother Aaron was sent to him.

Seen in this light, capacity building is not a one-way street, not a wagging finger and a 'we know better with our OA instrument'. Learning processes come about through reciprocity, based on mutual respect and interest, even in each other's vulnerabilities, and from a shared commitment and perspective to alleviate poverty.

This way, the ripples spread by the stone cast into the water could very well change the course of the entire river.