



What Peers think about PSO's Programmatic Approach

PSO, September 2004

With the PSO stocktaking process on programme approaches amongst its membership in the latter half of 2003, a wealth of new insights became available. Quite a few discussions came up that remained partly unresolved, especially on definitions, criteria and quality standards. To get some fresh input, PSO approached selected international peers to reflect on our learning process and its results as captured in [The Art of Capacity building](#). This was the outcome:

Real Lavergne (senior analyst, CIDA, Canada), underlines the importance of PSO's shift from projects to programmes. 'First of all, PSO's evolving approach is part of an international trend, based on lessons learned and on the spread of information technologies that make programmatic approaches more feasible than they once were', says Lavergne. 'Canadian NGOs, CIDA's Partnership Branch, and Canada's own umbrella NGO organization, CCIC, are all attempting to move in similar directions. When speaking of 'programmatic' approaches, it needs to be clear that this can mean many things. The basic question to ask is: whose programme are we talking about? If the programme is that of a Southern partner institution it will involve any range of partners. A programme-based approach (PBA) is an approach that supports that programme in collaboration with other partners. It is demand-

led and unconstrained by supply side TA considerations or distinctions between different needs (service delivery versus capacity building). This can be distinguished from how a donor programmes its own aid - whether at a country level (country programming framework) or with a particular partner. The latter, is what we call a programmatic approach in CIDA, and it seems to be PSO's view as well.'

PSO should revisit its definition

Still PSO's definition leaves Real somewhat confused. 'Most of PSO's criteria are all good things to be sure, but they could be applied just as well under a fairly comprehensive project. I think one has to remember that a 'project' means many things internationally - from sending a stand-alone TA, to large fairly well integrated projects. What you are calling a 'programmatic approach' could equally be described as a long-term partnership for capacity development between PSO and developing country partners'.

Alternatively (instead of distinguishing between projects and programmes), Real suggests: 'It might be better to speak of a continuum from the most comprehensive approaches to programming at one end, to specialized, niche-based programming at the other. Both are legitimate approaches to take in different contexts (including even individual TA).'

Brenda Lipson, director of Training, INTRAC, UK, shares some of Real's 'confusion'. 'For me, the term 'programmatic approach' implies taking an approach which is 'programmatic' in nature. So, this means that there will be certain characteristics to this 'programmatic' nature i.e. those that define what makes a 'programme'. This, to me, implies characteristics which are to do with things like achieving 'coherence' of objectives, interventions, etc., at a more

strategic or meso-level, within a multi-dimensional framework, with potentially a variety of actors or portfolio of interventions.' When Brenda looks at PSO's definition she finds that it includes such elements, but there are also others which to her, 'relate more to underlying principles, such as participation of stakeholders or 'shared strategic choices'. Brenda sees a challenge for PSO in further defining the key core characteristics, and separating these from more general 'Quality Criteria'. In addition she urges PSO to develop a reader or user-friendly version of PSO's Programmatic Approach.

Meg Kinghorn (director, Impact Alliance, USA) adds: 'While the UNDP shift (from projects to programs) in the early nineties did include a move toward an integral and logical entity of complementary interventions, the Copernican shift was intended to be that programs would be based on national plans, rather than paralleling them. Since PSO and its members support civil society actors, basing plans on national planning isn't a useful application. And yet PSO's shift in thinking that programs must be coherent from the PSO member perspective, as well as coherent from the partner perspective, directly addresses the considerable obstacles of ownership and coordination. A reflection by PSO on what would be the unit of planning – sectoral, national or regional networks of partners, formally or informally comprised - might 'significantly add to the richness of PSO's reorientation', according to Meg Kinghorn.

Some ways forward

She also suggested some other ways forward. 'Two critical skills for any effective NGO are to identify their capacity strengthening needs and pursue meeting them. Our traditional approaches have stunted on these skills on

both accounts. Assessments performed by external evaluators generate a list of needs that are met by the provision of experts or training courses. This perpetuates dependency on the northern partner/donor'.

'A holistic program approach might focus on strengthening the NGOs ability to take charge of its own growth and also the ability to meet its needs. Facilitative self-assessment and strategic planning exercises give the NGO the opportunity to reflect on its capacities and goals. These plans then become important for defining the benchmarks and roles and responsibilities of all the stakeholders involved. They also form the backbone of a monitoring system as they are revisited annually to mark progress, which can even involve beneficiaries and other stakeholders.'

'And lastly, giving the NGO space to identify and engage the services required, is important. The PSO membership might even want to broaden the variety of interventions to include capacity building credits for partners that engage with a certified group of local service providers. This both gives the NGO an important element of choice, and strengthens the local economy of service providers that will outlast donor intervention.'

Promote innovation and flexibility

According to Meg Kinghorn, this can also be paralleled to support the reorientation of PSO members toward a programme approach. 'This might change the process to one of group learning rather than compliance, which seems to create some tension within PSO. Members state that they need room to experiment, innovate and pilot ... which is indeed true if your goal is to develop radically more effective strategies for capacity development.' Brenda Lipson adds: 'to me, one thing that PSO could be doing is facilitating a debate and dialogue

with the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its affiliated organisations on how to promote innovation, and to encourage a 'flexible' approach to programming. Particularly in capacity building, these are two areas that I (and INTRAC) believe are critical contributions the NGO sector can make, over and above the official sector. It would be interesting to see whether PSO could think about planning/monitoring tools which build in a flexibility to respond to new, emerging issues as they arise within the programmes: to counteract the logframe/ZOPP world...! Of course accountability will still be a concern, but I do feel that PSO could perhaps be a key player in encouraging reflection within the Dutch sector.'

Epilogue

These and other observations are welcomed by PSO. Within the framework of PSO's PME-system the definition of 'programmes' and the 'programmatic approach' have recently (2004) been revised taking into account the results of the stocktaking process, and observations from this peer review. The other challenges will definitely be food for thought (and action) for PSO to stimulate further debate and learning.