The Singer, not the Song

The Vexed Questions of Impact Monitoring and Social Change

Reflections on an exploration between some European donors and some southern African development NGOs, entitled: Impact Assessment and Impact Monitoring – How do we know we’re on the Right Track?

“Acts have their being in the witness. Without him who can speak of it? In the end one could even say that the act is nothing, the witness all. ... If the world was a tale who but the witness could give it life? Where else could it have its being?”

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Framing the Reflections

During November 2010 a few European donors and a much larger number of southern African – mostly South African – leaders of NGOs came together for a two and a half day conversation which was entitled Impact Assessment and Impact Monitoring – How do we know we’re on the Right Track?; about 25 people in all. The idea was conceived about a year earlier by the EED programme person for South Africa, as a way of stimulating some critical thinking around … critical thinking on the part of the NGOs concerned. He was concerned that NGOs take their own self-reflection processes seriously, and wanted to encourage this by getting organisations, through their leadership, to come together and share their own experiences, insights and questions around the challenging question of organisational and strategic effectiveness.

By and large the NGOs involved are social change NGOs, concerned with long-term social transformation, with the transformation of socio-political relationships, with the facilitation and activation of community-led movements and associations engaged with various sectors of social functioning. Participants are, by and large, social and political activists and leaders of long standing, and their NGOs have been involved in the field of social change for many long years. Their work is focused, primarily, not on doing things for others, but on accompanying people’s own efforts of social transformation. One could say that the overall objective of their efforts is the much deeper work of shifting people’s perceptions of themselves and their possibilities, of the social dispensation of which they are a part, and also of accompanying people and communities in the search for more inclusive and socially just social structures, policies and processes. Despite this, though, these organisations do implement particular projects with material outcomes; and some of the communities they work with value this “assistance” higher than any other.

We have been asked to facilitate the conversation. We are, to an extent, trusted by most of the participants who know us, or know of our work, to enable the conversation to move into contested and even conflictual terrain without flinching and without prejudice. We are also development practitioners as are most of those present, with our own practice, and we share the same issues as those present with regard to assessment and weighing of the impact and value of our work, and we are not given to reducing the complexity of what we all face in our work.

The idea is not to arrive, in these short days, at a common method or technique of impact assessment suitable for all organisations, practices or situations, but rather to engage seriously with each other and with the subject matter in order to ascertain whether there is sufficient stimulated interest amongst participants to engage in a longer-term process of collaborative investigation and experimentation with respect to the monitoring and ongoing reflection on, and assessment of, the value of our work. The provided space is premised on a sense that many of us engaged in development work could do far more than we currently do with respect to such ongoing assessment; still the space is an entirely free opportunity for everyone to reflect and interrogate and learn, and the space has been provided –
made free – by EED, without condition and without prejudice, and it is to be valued on this ground alone.

But things are never so simple.

The background to these discussions, the context within which they take place, is of an increasingly managerial and bureaucratic approach to development work (or social relief and change work more generally). Results-based management, an emphasis on prediction and control, the assumptions that underlie a mechanistic and instrumental approach to development and social intervention, are in the ascendancy. Funding, globally, is getting tighter, rules and regulations are getting tighter, criteria for assessment of work done in the field more inflexible and more specified. And set further and further from the field itself.

Within a context where poverty is growing rather than diminishing, despite all funding efforts to the contrary, those NGOs reliant on funding face faceless hierarchies of funding provision – the governmental and institutional ‘back-donors’ who hold many of the purse strings and have become arbiters of much of prevailing donor culture – which transfer a corporate mind-set of short-term results and log-framed logics and distinct material projects, as opposed to more theme-based and responsive programmatic approaches. One could say that as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, the terms of engagement - the modern rules of largesse perhaps - dictate ever more stringent criteria and regulations and acceptable projects with respect to the provision of funding, and provide that funding with a financial investment angle as the bottom line. Such the context.

Up till very recently, EED’s funding was free of these looming constraints. Free to engage with ‘partners’ within an approach based on trust and the reciprocal features of human relationship, and on ongoing intelligent conversation interspersed with programme evaluations from time to time, and the provision of organisation development support where deemed necessary. Very recently, in fact between the time that these discussions were first mooted and the conversation itself, EED has been constrained to radically tighten its regulations with respect to impact assessment. Now, the narrative and discursive approach to assessment of ‘field value’ with respect to particular funding will no longer do, there is a demand to know more rigorously and precisely exactly what difference an organisation is really making in the field with respect to particular projects completed within a particular timeframe. EED has become party to a new discourse in which words like indicator and outcome and impact and assessment predominate.

There are, then, dynamics raised by the contradictory role in which the donors find themselves: on the one hand friends of the NGOs they fund, offering an opportunity for (sell) reflection, and on the other hand messengers of bad tidings, bureaucrats come to lay down the new procedures which NGOs might deem a tightening of the noose around their necks. There are, as well, dynamics between the NGOs themselves; some regard the new funding specifications as something that simply has to be lived with, a ‘necessary evil’, and want to learn how to fill in the required spaces correctly, others want to discuss the ‘evil’ itself, and regard the required tickboxes as activists would any unjust or unacceptable dispensation.
There are also some people here who do not have problems with the new dispensation, and are eager to learn how to master it.

There is then, in what follows, no attempt to follow the proceedings of the conversation with regard to sequence, particular process or specific point. No attempt to be exhaustive. Despite, and in part because of, the dynamics, much emerged of great relevance, but most likely no one participant would agree with what we found to be key aspects of relevance. We have chosen, therefore, in writing this report, to write our own appreciation and perception of the relevant aspects of the conversation that struck us as true in the sense of being a true reflection of the conversation as a whole. At every moment, as facilitators, we had to listen both for the individual position and for the emergent flow and position of the conversation as a whole. For us the conversation turns out to have great importance, given the context in which we all find ourselves, as activists.

**Opening Ripostes**

The very opening of the conversation configures the terrain that will follow. Are we here to talk about the problem of impact assessment, or are we here to collaborate and learn from each other about social change strategies? Or, are we here to talk about critical and reflective enquiry into our practice? Are these in fact the same thing? Or do they, indeed, actively contradict each other?

The task faced by the EED programme person in opening the space is reflective of the ambiguities we all find ourselves in. He is trusted and respected by all present for the depth, intelligence and openness with which he engages the people he works with, his ‘partners’; he has the right mix of endurance, commitment and irony, and he in turn respects the complexity of social change processes. He genuinely dignifies his partners by the giving of his trust; at the same time he constantly questions the real value of the work that all of us are doing, himself included; and deep down we all question it too, despite our somewhat assertive rhetoric. We all believe we’re doing the best we can, but ‘results’ are not easy to see, society is changing, patterns are entrenching or disappearing around us, and our practices are not always robust and accurate enough to hold and guide the unfolding skein of the social fabric.

We all despair, and we all remain inspired, and the programme person thinks that perhaps if we were more rigorous with respect to self-reflection our practices might become more robust and accurate, and produce some really tangible ‘results’. He really does manage to occupy the position of ‘accompagnier’, with material resources to back this up. And up till now, up till the organising of this very conversation, EED has enabled this space to stand.

But things are not so simple.

His opening has to include a section that goes something like this:
We have planned this workshop for quite some time. In our first letter to you we stated our purpose, to explore different ways of impact monitoring with our partners. We also sent out a second letter and I would like to give you some background to that second letter: EED receives funds from the German government (since 1962) and for this year we received 100 million Euro. The government is now asking EED how we monitor the impact of our work. We have signed a memorandum with the government that states the following: it says what we cannot do, it lays out our funding principles, and it gives reporting requirements; most especially meticulous reporting is required financially. We have obligations of stewardship. EED is responsible for the selection of the right partner organisations; however EED is not responsible for the success of a project. This approach has worked for almost ten years but now the government also wants more impact monitoring. The OECD has introduced the Paris Declaration = monitoring for results. Now we get pressure from the Paris Declaration, the Federal Court of Auditors and also the German public. The Federal Budget code changed and led to discussions so many things have since changed. Thus there is a need for more impact monitoring. We have to comply.

With impact monitoring we have to have a goal, a project objective, activities and outputs. The new thing about impact monitoring is that we have to look at how to measure the outputs. We have to come up with indicators. This can be a very mechanical way of looking at things. The indicators have to be specific, measurable and realistic.

Each project needs to have one or two objectives and each of these objectives needs to have two or three indicators. But this is not our main focus in this workshop, not at all. Let us accept that it is legitimate for government to ask for impact monitoring. And organisations individually want to know their impact. What we are wanting to understand here is in what sense Impact Monitoring is a relevant issue, what are its challenges, and do we wish to work further together in this ongoing journey of discovering together whether we are on the right track, and if so, what would be the best way of doing this?

Already, in this last paragraph, the ambiguity of intentions and relationships is manifest in these alternative ways of framing the enquiry, an ambiguity that was entrenched in the very title of the conversation. Two separate phrases masquerading as one. “How do we know we’re on the right track?” is an open-ended question, unbounded, inviting conversation; it’s a discursive question, unthreatening and non-judgemental yet potentially rigorous and very challenging. It’s an inviting question, an invitation to the consideration of a complex conundrum that may have no one answer, or whose answer may change through the very tackling of the question. Most of all, it implies dialogue. All this means too that there is no end to the question, and no final arbiter.

On the other hand, however, Impact Monitoring and Impact Assessment is not a question at all, but a statement or name or command. It has a ‘should/ought’ quality to it, a boundedness, a normative insistence. One must engage with a particular procedure or technique, which seems as though it is collectively understood and agreed to (though in reality it is anything but). The word ‘impact’ implies particular kinds of results, and the words ‘monitoring and assessment’ have
a judgemental quality to them, and the implication of a standard against which to judge. The concept carries a feeling of righteousness about it, a feeling for clear definition and discrimination, thus cutting its way -- perhaps helpfully -- through the complex interweaving of unbounded processes and dynamics, and demanding clarity.

These two ideas -- of the imperative around impact, monitoring and assessment, and of reflective enquiry into practice -- have come together in the title of this conversation and in the opening address, and perhaps they can inform each other, or perhaps, through understanding the dynamic of their relationship, we may inform ourselves as to how to proceed in the tricky terrain of social change. In a sense, the struggle between these two conceptions frames the conversation itself quite precisely.

So we will pursue these particular lines of enquiry through the course of this paper. In the first instance, we look at the reaction to the new EED constraints, to the new emphasis on 'Impact Monitoring', which entails new rules of engagement. Though elements of this response run through the entire conversation, we try to capture the main aspects as strands of one argument (Possible Impacts of Impact Monitoring). We then move onto the question of how we actually ascertain whether we are on the right track with our change efforts, or not; how this relates to impact monitoring, how it relates to the work we are doing and to our organisational processes and cultures (Tracking our Traces). It becomes clear that the dynamic between these two ideas creates a helpful framing for a central challenge of our work (The Enigmatic Dance between Achievement and Emergence). And so to a conclusion that arises after the conversation has ended, as we, facilitators, sit around the glowing embers of the fire late into the night, watching the wind rustle the coals into wakefulness (The Singer not the Song).

**Possible Impacts of Impact Monitoring**

We have not come here to discuss the new EED impact monitoring and assessment regulations and specifications, which themselves are compliant with the new German Government regulations, which in their turn respond to the Paris Declaration. We are told that we will have to comply strictly with these new regulations in the future, but they are not the point here. The point is to discuss the real task of making sure that we are aware of the value, or lack thereof, in our work, and to use such information to build the knowledge required to improve our effectiveness. It's a pity that these two EED 'agendas' coincide at this moment, but let us not get sidetracked by the compliancy regulations. Surely the necessity for holding ourselves accountable to a few indicators of impact cannot be debilitating, and may even help to 'keep us on track'. And certainly, those who donate the money have a right to ascertain whether their donations have any value.

It is hard, though, not to get sidetracked by the compliancy regulations; for most of the participants in this conversation they are as a red rag to a bull. Some participants do not quite follow the fuss, or can yet view the new regulations as a necessary evil, and they are here in fact to learn how to set indicators, how to
translate objectives into outcomes, how to tell the difference between an outcome and an indicator, how to develop adequate outcomes and indicators for empowerment programmes, for capacity building and for long term social change. For most of the participants, however, such technical and bureaucratic questions are a very real part of the problem of impact monitoring, and for these it is the new emphasis on impact monitoring itself that is the problem.

The problem is compounded by the nature of the work that the majority of participants, and their organisations, do. This work entails long term and complex social change facilitation – not engineering, not implementing projects – in the midst of a largely hostile global and local context, where every tiny aspect of the terrain keeps affecting every other; where contradictions and anomalies abound, and where community as well as individual capacity and possibility are affected by so many variables that are so far out of reach of the span of influence exercised by the NGOs concerned, that to isolate particular variables and delineate short-term outcomes which will indicate impact is more than naïve. Indeed, for many it seems to almost intentionally direct NGO change efforts into the safe waters of project implementation, infrastructure creation, charity and relief work; short-term, piecemeal projects that can easily be measured, and that therefore rock few boats, can become the order of the day.

It is in this sense that some participants feel it important to debate the politics of the attempt to make the work we do measurable in this particular way. If one is trying to facilitate change with respect to the very structures and mores and patterns and entrenching regulations of a social system that benefits human minorities rather than human majorities, and if one is trying to do this by helping to “shift the consciousness” of the excluded and powerless (a very long term project that works against great odds) then simple measurement of parts can become slightly ludicrous. While we all concur about the relevance of Complexity Theory to social change, and we all increasingly recognise the intricate web of relationships that enable, on the one hand, and disable, on the other; yet we are told to isolate, and measure, and keep the timeframes down to three years (preferably one). Someone wonders: “Impact becomes an abstract concept. How do you measure it?”

Certainly there is a need for knowing whether we are having an effect or not, but this particular approach, say many participants, will never tell us anything of value. Worse, it mitigates against our doing things of value, we are caught up in trivialities, and this is not naïveté on the part of the powers that be, but major – and insidious – political interference. The message is that we are rewarded for our bureaucratic skills, and perhaps for our philanthropic and charity work, but never for the complex task of facilitating real social change. What we call development work is marginalised by these new regulations. Measurement is hostile, someone protests, it opposes the gradual building of social movements, of social capacity, of social equity. As a participant notes: “One can limit the use of aid, instead of using it for social change and rather put it into `bricks and mortar’ projects. There can be a very strong political agenda”.

This emphasis on the technical and the piecemeal performed within an engineering mind-set – scattered projects with arbitrary indicators of outcome which purport to indicate impact – inevitably must have the effect of dumbing the development
project down. Someone remarks: “I am left with a major concern that built into this process is limitation. Reality is a complex issue, you don’t know how things will happen; you have to make a judgement call. This Impact Monitoring process doesn’t allow for articulation, it requires a dumbing down”. Donor programme officers in the global north, as well as NGO functionaries in the global south, begin to read their work through easily measurable indicators all held together within forms that reduce the complexity of the dynamic whole into static and fragmentary pieces. The process may begin to shred our very thinking capacity, or at the very least provide our thinking with a reductive framework that bears little resemblance to the reality in the field. These kinds of procedures then act to reduce the thinking processes (capacities) of northern donor officers and southern NGO workers alike – not to mention the communities they work with – and a simplified conformity with bureaucratic regulation becomes the norm, and its highest reward. And inevitably development, one of the most complex and confusing endeavours of modern humanity, becomes poorer. As someone observes: “Modest objectives are better, there is then less pressure. Someone has said that results-based reporting destroys thinking”. And the poor get poorer, and the rich get richer.

It is noted that results-based reporting, or impact monitoring, does not take any account of practitioner and organisational learning, that one was simply ‘graded’ as to whether the predicted result had been met or not. But failure to achieve that result may have generated a huge amount of learning for practitioner and organisation and the system as a whole, and in this sense a huge amount of development, or capacity for development, may have taken place, yet none of this latter is noted. To note such learning would be to penetrate more deeply into practitioner and organisational thinking and strategising, as well as into relationships with the communities they serve, yet such penetration would then demand a far more intensive interaction between, say, EED and their ‘partner’, than can possibly be the case where the confines of ‘three predicted indicators of outcome per objective’ dominate. The kind of relationship that ‘partners’ used to have with their programme officer – at least in the EED programme person’s case – becomes far more relevant and appropriate than the ticking of boxes … yet this is the very relationship which is now threatened by the ticking of boxes.

As one participant puts it: “Are you saying that you (EED) can only use objectives and indicators to monitor impact from now on? That is not deep enough. There is the danger that one overtakes the other”. It is necessary to take into account that ‘impact’ is not only a purportedly desired outcome – ‘impact monitoring’ has become a managerial system and culture and must be assessed in these terms. As such, it has certain dominant characteristics. It measures social interventions in predominantly quantitative terms, through bureaucratic processes; in this way, it does not require or promote reading and intelligent dialoguing and conversation within organisations or amongst practitioners and organisations about each other’s work, and NGOs then do not need to collaborate or learn from each other. They just need to tick the same boxes. Further, it depends on an ethically and politically neutral conception of the aims and methods of development work, and of poverty alleviation work; one thing is as good as another, provided the indicator box gets ticked. It takes little if any account of process and relationship and dynamic, between the NGO and the communities it serves, and by so doing it devalues these aspects of the work. In short, it reduces and makes shallow and superficial a very
complex, challenging, inspiring and daunting field of endeavour, and in this, we all become poorer.

The argument, from the side of those who give out the money, is that they need to know the value and import of the work being done, and these indicator procedures of impact monitoring will in any case not adversely affect the deeper work that NGOs may be trying to do. From the side of most participants engaged in this conversation, it is clear that these procedures, inevitable as they are, will without doubt affect this deeper and longer-term work. One person even asks: “Can we fool the donors in order to fulfil the Impact Monitoring requirements and still continue to do what we do?”

Ah, but apart from anything else, this must raise the inevitable rejoinder, from the side of the donor – and also, hopefully, from the higher side of ourselves – as to whether we know with any fair degree of accuracy exactly what it is that we do, and where it is that we get with that doing. Leaving aside the word ‘impact’ and the procedures of ‘impact monitoring’ – how do we know we’re on the right track?

And, in any case, the original idea for this workshop/conversation came from the donor’s sense that there was a need for more critical engagement and reflection on practice, on organisational life, on quality, than is happening currently.

**Tracking our Traces**

We don’t really know whether we’re on the right track, not least because every move we make changes the terrain within which we’re travelling. This is the thing about social complexity. Every situation and every community which is the subject of our attentions is itself subject to the influences and interventions of countless other communities and situations. And every community and situation is in a state of change all the time. And we, who seek to intervene, are not separate from whatever it is we intervene into; on the contrary, we’re an integral member of the complex whole into which we intervene, and we change as it changes. All this stands to reason, if we take complexity seriously. So it’s not as though we can have a map of the terrain that we will travel through, and use that map to plot the route, and predict the destination, and devise foolproof indicators that may attest to outcome. As we travel the terrain, it changes, and we change, but as it changes so the indicators and outcomes that indicate impact will also change. The world is not a giant Meccano, or Lego, set. The world is fluid, and we are fluid, and everything is shifting in ways that we can gradually learn to anticipate, but not predict, and never control.

Yet the world is not only fluid. As with every flowing medium, patterns get set up through movements that repeat themselves, and so society develops some patterns that entrench themselves and embed themselves, and loses other patterns, and some of those that are lost were helpful, and some of those that were gained may be unhealthy. It is those patterns which these development NGOs are trying to work with, to understand. And to make matters more complex still, we cannot work to change those patterns in others, we can only facilitate circumstances that may enable those others to change those patterns in themselves. As we need to change them in ourselves. The work is premised on facilitation, not implementation. We
try to assist with what is emerging. And often there is little emerging, and social patterns and dynamics entrench unjust practices, and our efforts have little to show for themselves, despite the blatancy of our commitment.

Many participants in this conversation have been involved in this work and even in their particular NGOs for very long years, years during which the world has changed, and the region has changed, and the countries have changed, in very radical ways, and years during which the world and the region and the country have remained the same, in many debilitating ways. It may seem that little of substance has changed, and it may seem that huge things have changed, and it may often seem that both, and neither, can be specifically attributed to the particular efforts of individual organisations. How then to tell whether we’re on the right track?

As much as we rant and rail against the strictures of impact monitoring, alternative methods of ascertaining whether we’re on the right track, of monitoring our efforts and adjusting accordingly, are not well developed. It is noted clearly by many participants that they struggle with the question of evaluation and monitoring and self-reflection. Many participants are clear that they do engage in these activities, but there is little clear picture that arises as to methodologies employed and results arrived at. One participant says: “We need to strengthen the process of reflection. We need to be more creative about different levels of reflection.” Another says: “How do we know about the deeper truth of what we’re doing? How can we do this, and how can we make our enquiry into what we do as alive as the work?” And one director notes, in a phrase that seems to find resonance with everyone: “I am hoping for an open space to explore this thing that sometimes plagues me”.

At one point in the conversation we undertake a particular exercise – we tell each other stories about the things we do in the field, in our social change practice, without talking about why we do these things, without engaging in explanation or rationale; those who are listening are asked to describe our theory of change from what they have heard. In other words, we move from practice to theory rather than the other way around. Later we do this with the ways in which we reflect on our practice, how we reflect on what we do, how we make sense of the complexities of what we do, what are the mechanisms and processes we employ, and what are the products we generate; and to do this without going into the why, without rationalising or explaining. Once again our listeners are asked to listen deeply enough to be able to see what are the different ways of knowing/understanding that we are bringing into play here, what informs our reflection methods.

These exercises, in terms of their methodology, reveal things about listening, about levels of listening that are new for many of the participants to the conversation. They reveal that we all too often think we are listening and observing when actually we are presuming and assuming. They reveal that all too often we do not observe what is actually in front of us because we are already projecting our presumptions and previous experiences and unacknowledged expectations onto the observations we make; that much of the time we genuinely do not see what is in front of us. Without learning and applying the arts and disciplines of real observation and sense making, honest reflection cannot take place. Real reflection is not just an adjunct to the work we do, it’s a practice in its own right, and an
Apart from highlighting aspects of reflection from the very way they are undertaken, the exercises also highlight aspects of NGO practice through the content of the stories. A number of lights are shone on this practice.

“We are working hard but I’m still not sure if we’re getting anywhere”.

“The only indicators we can take responsibility for are the things we can achieve ourselves. How then to take responsibility, or even set, indicators for the shifts in others, even though these shifts are the point of our work?”

“This morning we all acknowledged that power was something we grappled with in our organisation. This afternoon I realised we reflect the same power dynamics we struggle with. We replicate the power dynamics, both inside the organisation – say when strategic thinking does not involve field staff sufficiently – and between the organisation and the communities it serves, say when we do not invite these communities to evaluate or monitor us. It seems essential that we include the communities we serve in our monitoring processes. How do we do this?”

“We engage in some formalised reflection processes which are quite dead. They have no life; they become a sort of tedious abstraction. The closer we get to activities, the more alive the reflections become.”

“In a way we are back where we were yesterday. We reflect only against required indicators and the stuff that is really important to us gets discussed more informally”.

“Yes, it’s interesting that the more formal the reflections, the more distant they are from the site of work, the more they are done against abstract indicators, and the more stilted, paralysing and boring, tedious, they become. When reflection takes place informally and directly connected to the activities, it has more life, more warmth, more charge, and the insights and learnings increase, and are relevant. But we often fail to then document, or institutionalise, or formalise, these learnings, and so we often fail to change”.

“These reflections are one thing, but mostly, even when they are insightful and profound, we struggle, as practitioner or organisation, to actually make the changes that the insights demand of the way we are organised, and of our practice, and so we do not improve, we do not adapt, we continue as we were, despite the learnings”.

“Sometimes organisational processes limit you in what you put on the table for reflection and/or discussion. By organisational processes I mean meeting procedures and reporting, dissemination procedures, but also who
is responsible for the reflections, and what kind of an atmosphere they take place in”.

“Yes, in fact our very organisational structures often militate against reflection, the hierarchical and often male way that we are organised, the boundedness, or lack of porousness, of our organisations, the fact that we are so separate from, even privileged over, the communities we serve”.

All in all, it emerges that, after all these many years of work, there remain major questions around effectiveness and value, and there are significant limitations, even failures, when it comes to adequate reflection, monitoring, and figuring out how to figure out whether we’re on the right track. The questions around effectiveness are not, in fact, a problem, and may even be seen as an indication of strength and commitment and understanding – in a field of such complexity, were we not to have questions then there would really be something amiss. These questions do not imply lack of inspiration and energy, they do not imply lack of vision and imagination and strategic capacity, and they do not imply failure or even lack of effectiveness; on the contrary, they imply a passionate and responsive intimacy with both the communities being served and one’s own practice in serving them.

But the failures of reflection, of monitoring and of bringing information so gleaned and knowledge so developed into an improved practitioner and organisational practice, this is indeed worrisome, and leaves us all in an untenable position when resisting the (perceived?) imposition of impact monitoring requirements. More to the point though, there are passionate and powerful questions raised around the need to find adequate and appropriate ways of reading and finding out whether we are on the right track. The understanding emerges, for many participants, that such reading is a sense-making process, rather than a number crunching process, that it has less to do with quantitative measurement and far more to do with making meaning, out of attentive observation, of what is happening in response to our field practice.

One participant noted that this process of sense-making, of reading situations for meaning, is not an instrumental exercise, just as the work of facilitating social change is not an instrumental practice in the sense of being performed on or for others, as outsiders. Rather, the practice of social change is determined as much by our own process of becoming as it is by other’s process of becoming. Our reflecting and our monitoring should not simply gather information for us but should entail a process of changing ourselves, so that we emerge from these reflection processes as changed as those we work with. We are never separate from, we are integral to the processes of social change that we nurture.

In this sense, an interesting angle on the debate between ‘open reflection’ and impact monitoring reveals itself. Impact monitoring, with its procedures and pre-set indicators, appears, at first glance, rigorous and consequential. The kind of open reflection referred to above appears, at first glance, too subjective, too arbitrary, too unfocused, too inconsequential. Yet the opposite may be true. Measurement, especially quantitative measurement, and the filling in of pre-ordained boxes with ticks and suchlike, is easy, like painting by numbers,
compared with the challenging task of reading for what is really going on, in all its complexity and with all its nuances and contradictions, and making sense of this. The rigour and disciplined observation and imagination used in an effective open reflection process makes the measurement procedures of impact monitoring seem like exercises done at primary school.

In the final analysis, both the quantitative and the qualitative forms of reflection may be necessary, but with respect to different ‘outcomes’, and if this is so then much hinges on what exactly we mean by ‘impact’. We take this up in the next movement of the conversation.

The Enigmatic Dance between Achievement and Emergence

We discover that there are two logics at play in the work that we all do, and these two logics are mirrored in the way we ascertain the value of that work. Nowhere is there recognition of these two logics; it’s always assumed that there is one logic, that we are searching for one way, one method, one outcome, one understanding of impact. If there are indeed not two logics but one, then at the very least this one exists on a continuum with two extremes. Because these two logics are polarities of each other.

When we try to achieve something, something material in the world, tangible and visible, time bound, separate from other things, something that depends primarily on our work and input, something that we have some control over, then we could say that we work with the logic of achievement, and that we could apply the logic of impact monitoring. When we work with complex social processes, which are possibly (at least in some ways) intangible and invisible, which are so long-term as to evade the confines of arbitrary time limitations (that is, they will take the time they take), which are intimately and inextricably bound up with many other things and processes, which depend primarily on the movements and energies of others (those others whom we serve), which we have very little control over, then we should perhaps be working with the logic of emergence, and we need to employ a different form of assessment, a different way of working out whether we are on the right track.

Let us look at this as though impact monitoring, on the one hand, and what we have called above ‘open reflection’, on the other, are two extremes of a continuum.

Impact monitoring responds best to short-term separate projects which involve implementation towards material and measurable outcome. Open reflection responds best where such impact monitoring clearly does not make sense, where long term programmes involve facilitation of others towards shifts in consciousness, in power dynamics, in capacity and in social relationships, structures and patterns.

Impact monitoring employs a particular discourse which uses particular jargon, such as ‘indicators’, ‘information’, ‘data’ and so on. These indicators are there to tell us how we know that something has taken place or not. Impact monitoring
thus works with the separate parts of a situation, and does not necessarily put these parts together, or require them not to fragment. Open reflection primarily involves the making of meaning of the situation that is observed, it involves the process of ‘deeply knowing’ the extent to which we’re on the right track, it involves deep awareness of what we are doing. As such, it deals with the whole (of a situation) as its primary focus, rather than with the parts; it demands that one read the landscape, the terrain, the qualitative gesture of a situation, rather than look simply at material parts. It involves looking at the relationship between the parts, which is the whole, rather than at the separate parts.

The language of impact monitoring comes as pre-set bureaucratese which indicates particular mindsets about social intervention that reflect the worlds of the financial giver, of centralised power and of bureaucratic managerialism. It has a clichéd quality to it; it’s used ubiquitously, repeated in forms and procedures, applied uniformly to every different situation. The language of open reflection, if that open reflection is effectively able to read new and unique situations, must be creative, free, imaginative, new, specific, adaptive and responsive, unique and accurate, generative of entirely new ways of seeing; and when written, reports should be of narrative form, challenging the reader’s intelligence, able to take that reader to new ways of seeing, able – thus – to themselves be developmental.

The processes involved in impact monitoring are preferably standardised procedures, packaged, pre-set, used, stale, able to be performed by computer-bound clerks, and without having any effect on those who use them (other than perhaps to dull their sensibilities). They imply a certain distance and removedness from the practice in the field, both in terms of role and process. The processes used in reflective enquiry need to be organic, with one insight and observation informing and changing the next, they are immediate, responsive to context and situation, of an intimate (not removed) quality, and very fresh; they should be performed by practitioners as well as the communities they work with, and they should keep people on their toes, awake and alive to every new nuance. They are connected processes, intimate with field practice, both in terms of roles and processes themselves.

In characterising impact monitoring, the words ‘mechanical, standardised, formalised, disconnected, distant’ come to mind. For ‘open reflection’ the words ‘living, flexible, connected, intimate’ come to mind. Impact monitoring works from the outside in, it is something that can be regulated and demanded, and it is achieved through standardised products (like measurements, forms and boxes). Open reflection works from the inside, it can only start from the inside, it cannot be regulated from the outside because it can only ever be done effectively if it is done freely and with a deep knowledge and understanding of the situation, and it emerges through collaborative thinking, through a mix of observation and thinking, through creative narrative writing which is able to describe and make meaning of the shifting terrain and which itself, through the very description, changes that terrain through bringing another consciousness to bear. Impact monitoring demands little other than compliance on the part of the practitioner; open reflection assumes that the practitioner will be changed through the process of reflection itself, else the reflection has not been effective (because change has not emerged).
Does all this begin to indicate how the method of knowing begins to influence the very practice it seeks to know about? Do you, dear reader, begin to see the weight of the choice that is made between the imposition of impact monitoring and the encouragement of open but rigorous reflection? Can you see how the measurements demanded and achieved (at its best) by impact monitoring differ from the making of meaning encouraged by, and emerging from (at its best) open reflection processes? That each ‘way of knowing’ presumes something about what we’re trying to find out; that each method of enquiry into social interventions presents a picture of the social intervention itself, and its expectations? Does it become clear how each way of knowing has a radical influence on the method and purpose and aims of the way of social intervention itself? That insistence on one method leads to biases as to the field practices that are engaged with in the field itself?

Can we now begin to understand why the ‘method/way of measurement’ as opposed to ‘deep enquiry as to whether we’re on the right track’ has political overtones (or undertones)? That a ‘gung-ho’ approach to impact monitoring becomes normative with respect to social interventions themselves? That therefore gradually but surely certain types of interventions become outlawed because they do not comply with the measurement procedures? Can we now begin to understand that the method of monitoring impact itself begins to define what is meant by impact? That the discourse and the procedures begin to influence what falls within the range of acceptable impact – and therefore acceptable practice – and what does not? That processes of standardisation imply processes of marginalisation, and that thereby the power of the giver is increased exponentially (and the poor get poorer)?

Of course, as we have indicated (or implied) above, this is a dance between tendencies, between logics, and to say all that we have above is not to rule one tendency or logic out in favour of another. It is to recognise the dangers inherent in not being conscious of these differences and how they operate (and how they ‘impact’ on practice), and it is to recognise that both logics must be catered for. Of course short-term projects must be engaged with to move towards long-term intentions, and of course projects must achieve outcomes, and of course we must be able to present clear arguments as to the value of these outcomes, and of course every social intervention is a mix of implementation and facilitation, of achievement and emergence.

We need to measure what we can measure, and observe nuances and differentiations beyond the realm of measurement, and make sense of these observations through processes of deep reflection and conversation. In the words of one participant: “We need to take our accounting seriously but make sure that the ‘unmeasurables’ have equal value”.

And, what is perhaps most important, the relationship between donor and ‘partner’ should reflect this dance, this mix. At the moment this relationship seems to fall between stools.
The Singer not the Song

Many years ago Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones sang a song with the above title. Some of you may remember it (a beautiful song). It proved to be true – so long as Mick Jagger is the singer, any song becomes a milestone. Put differently, every song has impact, whether the impact can be measured or not. It’s the singer, not the song.

It’s the practitioner, not the project.

The practice and the practitioner are one, the practice arises, emerges, out of the practitioner’s intention and discipline and unique approach.

Our organisational form needs to ensure that we reflect upon our practice continuously, that we keep our ears to the ground, ever close to the field of practice itself. And within this, keep our reflection as alive as our practice.

When the practice is deeply considered, reflected upon, it changes the practitioner, as well as everything in its field.

When the field changes, the practice must respond.

When the field changes and the practice responds, the practitioner grows through challenge, insight and resilient intention.

When the practitioner changes, the field changes, the communities change, the context changes.

Reflection on practice demands accurate observation, intelligent reading, the overcoming of fear amidst overwhelming odds.

Practitioner reflection, reflection on practice, to engage so honestly, needs collaborative reading and conversation and presentation of story.

We need to become witness to our own stories, and then the story itself becomes an emergent process of change.

Facts and figures, measurements and indicators, outcomes and objectives, projects and programmes – all these inform and frame adequate readings. But the reading itself goes beyond all of these, and cannot be dictated to by them.

Impact is an integral part of a whole practice, it shifts and changes with the shifts and changes and developments of the practice, it informs the practice and is informed by it.

Impact cannot stand outside of the context of the practice.
Neither can the practice stand outside the context of the practitioner and the communities served; and this context is informed by the practice.

Impact is an emergent quality unfolding from the inside, out of a changing situation; it informs that change, is informed by it.

Nothing is separate.

Nothing can be read or understood outside of this.

Facts and figures, measurements and indicators, observations, are essential to a reading and a witnessing, but they are not this reading and witnessing.

So far as ascertaining value is concerned, ascertaining whether we are on the right track, no practice and no practitioner is worth anything without paying this activity rigorous attention.

The paying of such attention demands and develops consciousness, intelligence and capacity.

None of us, neither donor nor ‘partner’, is adequate to such ongoing scrutiny; we have not yet developed the practice.

We must measure, but we cannot afford to allow such measurement to dumb us down.

We must reflect, but we cannot allow such reflection to be done with anything less than continuity, honesty, rigour and passion.

Organisational structures and processes, practitioner capacities, donor engagement with partners, community involvement with witnessing, creative ways of telling effective stories – all of these must be worked on if we are to move forward in the realm of social intervention towards social change.

Neither a distracted lip service, on the one hand, nor standardised and enforced procedures, on the other, will create singers out of any of us.

Without addressing this arena of reflection, no-one will want to listen to the song; no-one will hear the song.