THE CULTURE
OF EVALUATION

REFLECTION PAPERS
ON CULTURE
AND DEVELOPMENT

THE CULTURE OF EVALUATION

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François Matarasso (b. 1958 UK) is a community artist, writer and researcher. He worked as an artist with communities for 15 years before applying this experience to researching the theory, experience and outcomes of people's participation in culture. His 1997 report, *Use or Ornament?* Established influential concepts in cultural policy, and was followed by other studies of culture and community development, including *A Restless Art, How participation won and why it matters, (2019).* Alongside this research he combines practice as a community artist with consultancy specialising in evaluation and training, and has now worked in about 40 countries. He has served as trustee of *Arts Council England, the National Endowment of Science Technology and the Arts, and the Baring Foundation* and held honorary professorships at universities in the UK and Australia. His broad experience and expertise in the field of culture were also central to the SDC commissioning him as author for this reflection paper.

THE RISE OF EVALUATION

Nothing in this world is certain, wrote Benjamin Franklin, except death and taxes. Today, we should probably add evaluation to his list of unavoidable burdens. Anyone whose work depends on decisions made by others—from scientists and managers to clinicians and artists—knows they must account for its outcomes. This trend gathered pace towards the end of the 20th century, with the introduction of new ideas in public management. Failings in the international response to the Rwanda genocide crisis brought a new commitment to learning through evaluation, notably in the formation of a global network of NGOs, UN agencies, donors and academics in humanitarian aid: since then, ALNAP has built a library of 21,500 resources on Humanitarian Evaluation, Learning and Performance (HELP).[1]

In a generation, evaluation has been normalised—as much a culture as an industry.

This is a profound and welcome change. Working in hope and ignorance is no longer acceptable. In rich democratic states, public support for international aid depends on evidence that it produces positive, sustainable change. The agencies managing development programmes are equally concerned to know if their work is effective and how to make it more so.

Evaluation provides accountability and learning. It improves the efficiency and effectiveness of investment and builds stakeholder confidence in its impact.

This is well understood by SDC and its partners, including the small NGOs who deliver activities at community level. It is clearly set out in SDC evaluation policy documents, technical guidance materials and programme reports.[2] The principles, concepts and methods for the evaluation of SDC programmes align with those of the OECD and the Swiss Evaluation Society, and contribute to a growing body of knowledge held and shared by the international development sector.

EVALUATING CULTURE IN DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

Nonetheless, for SDC's work in culture and development, evaluation is particularly important *and* particularly difficult. The combination presents challenges to those who manage and evaluate cultural programmes with development goals. To support them in this, SDC recently convened a process of reflection, with a survey, a webinar, and the present paper. But before turning to their experiences and ideas for strengthening evaluation, it is worth explaining the critical importance of evaluation in cultural and development.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EVALUATING CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

Evaluating projects that use culture in development is vital because these initiatives are generally not well understood by decision makers or by the public.

The rationale for a sanitation or health project is self-evident, so their evaluation can focus on performance and outcomes. But the benefits of art and culture projects are often indirect and can be hard for outsiders to understand. For example, SDC's support for cinema and photography in Georgia aims to influence public attitudes towards minorities, tolerance and freedom of expression but these changes are not obvious. Indeed, such programmes may only be permissible *because* they do not make such outcomes explicit. In Palestine, an SDC project to empower women and strengthen democratic life focused on farming culture and agritourism as an acceptable subject through which to work on these contested questions. In development situations cultural projects often need some ambiguity about their different outcomes.

The value of a cultural project may be even less clear to non-specialists when its approach is ground-breaking or experimental. In areas such as emergency food distribution, decades of experience have allowed best practice to be identified and shared. But approaches to peace-building are more diverse and complex. The arts have a growing role here but the imagery and joyfulness that makes artistic work so attractive can obscure the seriousness of its place in reconciliation.[3] Evaluation is beginning to show the benefits, but both theory and practice are evolving and still not easily understood by non-specialists.[4]

Finally, cultural projects have to defend themselves against the idea that the funds would be better spent in a more obviously useful area, such as health or education. In reality, this is a false opposition since, in a development context, cultural projects always have non-cultural objectives. For example, in Southern Africa, SDC finances music and arts programmes to support sexual health education among teenagers, though outsiders may only see young people having fun.

Evaluation is accountability—it has a critical role in helping decision-makers and the public to understand why cultural projects can make a unique contribution to a multidisciplinary development strategy.

Evaluation is learning—it is essential to identifying the most effective methods in its context, so that transferable learning can be made available to others planning culture in development initiatives.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF EVALUATING CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

Evaluation of culture in development is therefore particularly important for accountability and building knowledge of good practice in an innovative field. Unfortunately, it is also more difficult than in more conventional development programmes because it involves multifaceted processes, and produces results that cannot be guaranteed as a vaccination programme might be.

A health campaign can be evaluated against precise indicators, often with a statistical baseline, and using an established theory of change model. There is often a body of similar work against which to compare outputs and outcomes, and success can be measured against precise targets. None of these things is true, or at least reliable, in culture and development.

Because cultural programme are multidisciplinary, they can lead to simultaneous change in several different fields. SDC has financed arts projects in Bolivia that support youth education, the creative economy and attitudes towards minorities at the same time. Theories of change do exist to show how investing in cinema can build tolerance or music programmes can support sexual health, but they are not straightforward. The outcomes of such projects may be indirect and, since they involve people's responses to artistic experience, it is tricky to establish a causal connection. Nor is it easy to show a project's impact on feelings or perceptions and yet that may have a lasting effect on people's behaviour and thus on development goals.

No one can guarantee how artistic experiences are received. Good cultural projects do not function as propaganda.

They do not seek—and are not able—to control how audience members respond to a film about the experience of a minority group. The screening has more subtle and more respectful intentions. It might, for example, influence how members of the minority group see themselves, while also protecting the range of what can be expressed in public. What is said in a post-screening discussion may be less important than encouraging people to share their ideas and feelings openly.

The theory and methods of cultural evaluation are steadily improving but it is a mistake to assess the impact of arts programmes simplistically and without taking account of their distinctive processes or the context in which they take place.

SOME EVALUATION PROBLEMS OF CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT

The methods used to evaluate development programmes can be applied to cultural projects, but adaptation is often needed to take account of their distinctive processes and outcomes.

Because the budgets for cultural projects tend to be small, the proportion available for evaluation is even smaller. There is a risk that the resources to evaluate cultural projects are simply insufficient to produce useful results. This is one reason why the small grants, widely used by Swiss Cooperation Offices to support cultural activities, are not evaluated and yet, taken together, these local initiatives represent a substantial investment and a missed opportunity for learning. With limited funds for evaluation, SDC often relies on grantees for data about their work. This can strengthen cooperation and build capacity, but some grantees struggle to find the skills, time or people for accurate record-keeping. In-

dividual project evaluations can be analysed in studies that answer larger questions, but only if consistent data sets and evaluation methodologies have been used. Even then, there is a lack of reliable baselines for comparison, perhaps because no cultural data has previously been recorded, or because the outcomes are not yet envisaged within existing policy.

Evaluation involves a trade-off between the value of what can be known and the cost of knowing it but, without a minimum commitment, there is a risk of producing no more than an illusion of knowledge. With limited budgets for cultural action it is natural to concentrate funds on directly beneficial activities, but an inadequate evaluation budget may prevent more than a superficial understanding of a project and its impact. Since cultural programmes often deal with intricate questions of belief, behaviour and identity, weak evaluation may be more misleading than informative.

Timescales also present difficulties. Evaluations are typically done around the end of an activity, but any change may not be clear for months or even years afterwards.

The effectiveness of a music programme supporting sexual health can only be known in relation to the participants' life outcomes in subsequent years, ideally compared with those of other young people who did not take part. Neither source of data is generally available, especially as funding priorities change on shorter timescales. Donors are rarely interested in projects completed years before, but taking a longer view can produce valuable learning. The start-stop nature of project funding affects evaluation because beneficiaries' assessment at the hopeful moment of completion may be very different from their view a year later, when no further support has been available to build on the success of the original work. Projects finish, but lives continue, and hope unfulfilled can sour into frustration and cynicism—but, by then, no one is asking about the project's impact.

SDC has been able to mitigate the challenges of evaluating culture in development by taking a strategic approach to its work. One good example is the Central Asia Art and Culture Programme, now in its fifth phase since 2007. The use of external evaluators to undertake an independent assessment of progress, supported by careful monitoring and reporting by the SCOs, means that there is a break point at which it is possible to review the results and make plans to build on them. Similar approaches are in place in other regions such as North Africa.

Finally, there is the question of sustainability, itself one of SDC's evaluation criteria, where it is framed in the form of the question: *To what extent will effects be maintained when the SDC's support has come to an end?*[5] This was a particular concern for SDC staff responding to the survey because the continuation of activity developed with Swiss resources is one clear measure of success. The difficulty is that such continuation often depends on conditions that are much larger than the project and not within its control. For example, programmes to support local creative industries may not succeed without external support because of small local markets, lack of national policy leadership, or weaknesses in infrastructure, education or distribution. It is unrealistic to expect forms of cultural production which in Europe depend on public subsidy to thrive without it in such difficult conditions.

Sustainability is best achieved through changes in capabilities and behaviours, which requires that these goals form part of a programme's concept and implementation.

POSSIBLE WAYS FORWARD

This paper argues that evaluating projects that use culture as a resource for development is particularly important because of the work's emergent and innovative character. It also argues that this work is unusually difficult because of the complexity of the interventions and their outcomes, as well as the limited financial and human resources available.

Identifying solutions to these challenges begins with recognising the distinctive nature of culture in development, which is both why it is a valuable addition to international co-operation and why it needs a different approach to evaluation.

It is also important to acknowledge the frustration and anxiety these difficulties can cause to those involved in evaluating cultural projects. People whose work is being evaluated often experience the process as judgment or control, even when that is not intended. To some degree this is unavoidable, since evaluation reports do inform decisions that affect people's lives. Even so, it is possible to establish a culture of trust where the complexity of outcomes is accepted, and all learning is valued in the evolution of practice.[6] The SDC Culture Matters learning community is a vital resource in this perspective.

Involving stakeholders more deeply in the evaluation of culture in development programmes would be a good step forward. It is normal to expect them to provide data and views about what has happened, but that risks locking them into a subsidiary position. When intended beneficiaries are brought into decisions about programme goals, indicators and benchmarks, the evaluation process can become empowering rather than judgemental, and support the broader developmental goals of international cooperation. Participatory approaches to evaluation are easier to implement in medium term programmes on a cyclical, iterative model.

Standard indicators would probably not be helpful because of the specificity of projects in their socio-cultural and economic context. An alternative solution would be to produce guidance on developing evaluation goals, indicators and methods that include all stakeholder interests. Such an approach to participatory evaluation would help empower partners and strengthen a learning culture.

After all, those intended to benefit from an intervention are well placed to define its aims and assess the degree to which they have been achieved.

Evaluating art programmes with social or economic goals is complex and demanding, but it is essential to improving practice and strengthening the place of culture in development. It is not easy, but accepting and sharing its difficulties is in itself part of moving the field onto a more mature level of policy and practice.

ENDNOTES

1 https://www.alnap.org/help-library

2 See for example *SDC Evaluation Policy* (March 2018), *SDC How-to Note Theory of Change* (March 2019), *SDC Guidance for the End of Phase Report and the End of Project/Programme Report* (October 2020) *Guidance Logframe* (May 2021), *SDC How-to Evaluation, A toolkit for programme and project evaluations* (September 2021), These and other guidance can be found on the SDC website: https://www.eda.admin.ch/deza/en/home/results-impact/wirkungsmessung.html

3 See for example the Ubumuntu Arts Festival in Rwanda.

4 See for example James Thompson, Jenny Hughes & Michael Balfour, Performance in Place of War, Seagull Books, 2008

5 *SDC Evaluation Policy*, March 2018, p. 7.

6 The FailSpace project at the University of Leeds Centre for Cultural Value is one initiative seeking to develop more constructive approaches to learning from complex project outcomes.