FAGLIGT ◆ FOKUS

- læring og metodeudvikling på tværs

Discussion Paper:

Complexity, learning and RAM reporting

Paper prepared for a presentation to a Fagligt Fokus seminar
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By Lisbet Fich

konsulentnetværket
*- networking consultants*

1 Introduction

1.1 The Fagligt Fokus process

The network Fagligt Fokus has undertaken an explorative process in 2014-15 focusing on how to monitor advocacy in complex situations and change processes. As a part of this process it was decided to produce this discussion paper with the aim to explore, how and to what extent it is possible to combine a results based approach to monitoring of advocacy (exemplified by the Danish Resource Allocation Model (RAM)) with an approach, which includes the complexity of advocacy change processes.

The Fagligt Fokus process has been documented in the paper "Monitoring of Advocacy – When the change process is complex" in February 2015. The paper was presented in a seminar on 4 March 2015. On this occasion the theme was further put into perspective by a presentation by ADRA on the experience of the RAM assessment, carried out by Danida in the autumn 2014, as well as by this presentation on the extent of complexity awareness in the RAM.

1.2 The concept of complexity

By a complexity aware approach, Fagligt Fokus understands an approach, which takes into account that many development change processes are unpredictable, characterized by high uncertainty, circular and not following a linear cause-effect model, and uncontrollable from the point of view of the intervener.
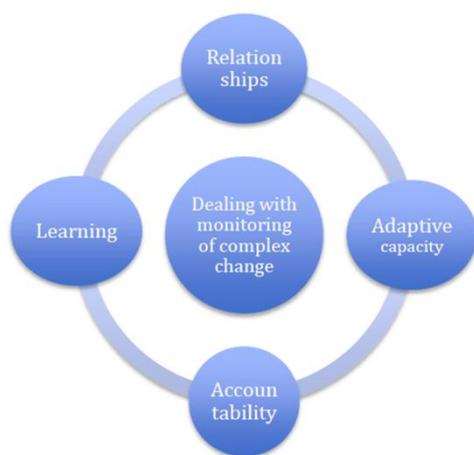
In this context the understanding of complexity awareness takes a system-based approach, where the individual elements of the system cannot be seen in isolation. Meaningful comprehension of change processes and effective interventions need to take into account several change parameters as well as the manner in which these parameters impact each other.

The model for dealing with monitoring of complex change, which has been used by Fagligt Fokus for understanding complexity in this context, is illustrated at the left, and contains four important parameters or points of observation.[1]

This paper, which documents a presentation made on 4 March, makes an explorative inquiry around the following questions:

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[1] The Fagligt Fokus process has been inspired by an action learning process conducted by a group of NGOs from the Netherlands (9) and Belgium (1), facilitated by INTRAC and documented in INTRAC Praxis Paper 26. The learning generated in this group reflects rather clearly that the practice of this group of NGOs is formed by a paradigm for civil society support different from the paradigm underlying the Danish civil society policy (prior strategy): the instrumental paradigm supporting CSOs as a means to an end versus the civil society paradigm supporting CSOs as an end in itself. Some perspectives and insights are therefore not as 'new' to a Danish context as to a Dutch/Belgium context.

- ✳ To which extent and how are the four points of observation in the complexity aware model reflected in the RAM standards?
- ✳ To which extent and how are the four points of observation in the complexity aware model identifiable in the RAM reporting across the framework organisations?

Methodologically, the paper investigates the questions in relation to the RAM tool only, i.e. mainly in relation to the four thematic areas of the RAM and its 24 standards. The paper does not intend to answer the above questions in relation to the whole RAM system, i.e. how the RAM tool has been interpreted and used or misused by different actors in the system and how the contextual complexity of the RAM system has affected the outcome of the RAM process.

For each of the four observation points, the paper i) summarizes key characteristics, ii) accounts for complexity aware aspects in the 24 standards (quantitatively), iii) explores the complexity aware terminology of the 24 standards (qualitatively), and iv) shares observations as regards the organizational practice across the board and reflects on likely causes and consequences of this.

It should be emphasized that this paper (prepared by the presenter, Lisbet Fich) on grounds of confidentiality, has only been able to share general thematic impressions with absolutely no disclosure of individual organisations' reporting practice.

2 Relationships in complexity

In a world of complexity, the paradigm has shifted from singular and linear change perspectives to a reality of multiplicity and diversity. It requires an explicit recognition of the presence of multiple actors in any context of social change processes; actors which play different roles and exercise influence on the outcome of change processes at different levels. The old concept of 1:1 partnerships between one northern organisation and one partner organisation is being challenged and in a growing number of situations it has become irrelevant.

This implies that the relationships between multiple actors need to come into focus by clarifying the different perspectives from various actors, defining roles (intermediaries, supportive actors, beneficiaries) and level expectations. Such clarity in the relations fosters trust and may form a basis for developing learning relationships as well as for partners to take ownership to own change processes (changes in professional practice and behaviour).

A complexity aware approach will embrace many different forms of interaction: collaboration, negotiation, dialogue, influencing, lobby, conflict, capacity development, etc. and respect the many different positions and perspectives on the same issue. Basically it presupposes development of new mental models of complexity and change.

2.1 RAM and complex relationships

A basic count of the 24 RAM standards shows that the standards to a high extent embrace the concept of relationships in terms of multiplicity and diversity. The previous 1:1 partnership approach seems to have been abandoned.

Relationships in complexity	
Strategic Planning: Standards: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8	8/8
Results reporting: Standards: 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 (18)	9/10
Strategic financing: Standards: 20	1/3
Role as Danish CSO: Standards: 23, 24	2/3
Total	**20/24**

As the table illustrates, the standards covering the organisations' strategic planning (prospective) as well as the standards covering the actual performance (retrospective) are more or less fully adapted to a complexity aware approach.

One of the three standards covering strategic finance and two of the three standards as regards the role of the Danish organisations as civil society organisations are framed in complexity aware terms.

2.2   Key words on relationships

In qualitative terms, the 24 standards have been analysed as to map the terminology applied. The categorisation of INTRAC has come in useful here (ref. INTRAC's Praxis Paper 26 (see reference above in footnote 1)) as illustrated in the below table:

Multiple stakeholders	Drivers of change, stakeholders, rights holders, duty bearers, partners, CSO, government, private sector, disaggregated groups, donors, new types of partners
Relations	Partnership relations, forms of collaboration, strategic partnerships, allies, mutuality, coalitions, alliances, funded/non-funded relations, equality in partner relations, self-assessment tools, budget holding, networks
Perspectives	Partner autonomy, align, co-ordinate, harmonise, different perspectives in partnerships, partners' view, partner driven, relevance at partner level

�֎   The terminology on actors comes through as very diverse and dynamic, and rather specific on type and position of actors.

✖   As regards relations, a variety of relations are mentioned in many places as well as the quality of the relation.

✖   Different perspectives are embraced and concretised in many standards, specifying for instance the partner perspective.

2.3   Complex relationships in practice

Observations on the three categories of relationships – in practice – can be synthesised as follows:

✖   Multiple stakeholders:
  ✖   In general, there is a great deal of diversity of stakeholders and actors illustrated in the reporting, thereby already reflecting that organisations navigate in a complexity aware manner with multiple partners.
  ✖   There are many cases illustrating new up-coming constellations of multiple and diverse partnerships with for instance the private sector.

✖   Relations:
  ✖   With regard to the relationships, the role of the Danish NGOs is changing and sometimes out of sync with the partners' expectations. New global structures with international alliances and corporate structures has – and will even more – put the current partnership model under pressure.

- There is hardly any evidence of a concrete real change in the power relation between the Danish NGOs and their partners to the benefit of the partner. There is no evidence of monitoring of the quality of partner relations.
- It needs further investigation to qualify, if the reverse situation is emerging: is there an emerging instrumentation of the partners from the Danish side? Are relations becoming more vertical/hierarchical than horizontal/equal?

- Perspectives:
  - Under the impression of international alliances and corporate structures, a tendency towards an upward alignment can be observed, where the Danish organisations appear to become more introvert within their respective alliances – exercising their influence within the alliances – and less focussing on development CSOs in the partner countries.

3 Learning in complexity

In INTRAC Praxis Paper 26, the importance of looking at learning in a complexity perspective has mainly been described in relation to four factors:

- Human behaviour is (becoming increasingly) unpredictable and difficult to capture within a rational planning framework.
- Contextual factors influence to a high extent the progress and outcome of interventions in social and political processes.
- A linear cause-effect relation is no longer feasible, and the exact effect of a particular intervention is hardly predictable. This has caused a shift in the crediting of impact from attribution to contribution.
- Due to the high degree of unpredictability, the frequency of unexpected results materialising is increasing – being either positive or negative – being important pointers for progress and direction.

With a stronger focus on unpredictable social change processes versus the prior service delivery of concrete outputs, continual and prospective learning becomes essential as an implementation strategy in any programme intervention and a key to effectiveness.

3.1 RAM and learning

Learning in complexity	
Strategic Planning: Standards: 5	1/8
Results reporting: Standards: 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18	8/10
Strategic financing: Standards: 19	1/3
Role as Danish CSO: Standards: 22, 23, 24	3/3
Total	13/24

... critical reflections ...	10/24

When it comes to a basic count of standards including learning aspects as outlined above, the result is around half of the standards. It is however, striking that there is hardly any learning aspect reflected in the standards related to strategic planning (proactive) – only in standard 5 which deals with innovation – while it is strongly represented in the retrospective reporting, both abroad and in Denmark.

Noteworthy is the fact that standard 11 on

harmonisation and alignment and standard 14 on partnership do not incorporate a learning perspective.

One of the ways of including learning aspects in many standards is the cross-cutting phrasing of *"critical reflections"*, which explicitly states an expectation to the organisations of learning from e.g. lessons learnt. This phrase appears in ten standards. This has been included with a view to mainstreaming learning instead of additional separate standards on learning.

3.2   Key words on learning

When counting and analysing the wordings in the RAM standards that reflect learning perspectives, it became obvious that the terms fall in four categories:

- **Retrospective learning**: The dominant terminology concerns retrospective learning, where phrases such as 'critical reflections', 'lessons learnt', 'evidence-based learning', 'learning from failures/non-achievements' and 'good practice' appear in many standards.

- **Prospective learning**: A few incidences include a more prospective approach to learning, which is supported by terms such as 'optimisation', 'innovation' (which has two separate standards), 'innovative approaches', 'responsive to emerging trends' and 'co-creative structures and processes'.

- **The relationship in learning**: The responsibility for learning in the relationship is specified in some cases by expecting 'mutual learning', 'openness in partnerships' and 'self-assessment tools'.

- **The use and application of learning**: Some standards express an expectation of learning to be put into useful practice through for instance 'mainstreaming of learning', 'wider organizational learning', 'replication of good practice', 'unfolded in practice'.

3.3   Learning in practice

Across the reporting from the organisations it is noteworthy that there are many examples of organisations applying well-known learning instruments such as carrying out regular programme reviews and evaluations. Also on the positive side is the extent to which organisations document that they are able to replicate *'good/best practice'* from one context and situation to another and to mainstream learning across programmes and interventions.

An issue of concern where traces of evidence are weak relates in particular to the cross-cutting expectation of organisations to critically reflect on achievements and progress in order to identify deviations, unexpected results, non-achievements and consequently navigate wisely in a complex territory. A focus on finding the *'best fit'* to a given situation is hardly reflected in the current reporting. The same applies to how organisations ensure wider organisational learning (in Denmark).

Overall there is a predominant trend towards retrospective learning, where learning from the past – past performance, solution of 'past' problems – is institutionalised in donor requirements, programme design, and organisational structures. The problem here is that such well-known retrospective learning has a relatively slow rate of turnover, and does not keep abreast with the pace of development that we witness nowadays. In complex change processes, 2-3-4-5 year old learning outcomes are often out-dated. In this perspective, learning in terms of for instance evaluation is an *'on action'* learning, which may come in

handy as documentation of results (accountability), but may be less useful as a contemporary learning instrument.

Learning *'in action'* is mainly reflected by organisations piloting a variety of interventions and later replicating these. This appears in general to be organised at decentralised levels and only at a rather small scale. Larger learning interventions such as realtime evaluations and similar 'in action' learning at institutional level are not reported. When considering that the cross-cutting capability to 'critically reflect' while flying/in action appears to be rather weak, this could affect the organisations' capability to navigate in a complexity aware manner.

Lastly, prospective learning (*'into action'*) has been identified as a major weakness in practice. Very few organisations distinguish between ambitious and conscious planned innovation and 'incidental improvement'. Innovation and proactive co-creation to respond to emerging trends – not only in a timely manner but ahead of events – is hardly seen. This seems to be a major challenge for the future.

Some suggestions for moving the learning agenda forward could be that:

- ✤ the RAM standards may be revisited with regard to learning and innovation;
- ✤ the organisations may reinforce learning through planning, implementation and monitoring at many levels: Individual, organisation, relationship, society;
- ✤ the organisations' indicators may be revisited to not (only) be targets to measure success or failure, but pointers that can help learning; and indicators may be phrased more precisely as learning indicators;
- ✤ the organisations may develop and strengthen their understanding, application and monitoring of concurrent and prospective learning and expand their tool box substantially in these areas.

4   Accountability in complexity

INTRAC Praxis Paper 26 categorises and describes accountability in terms of three relations:
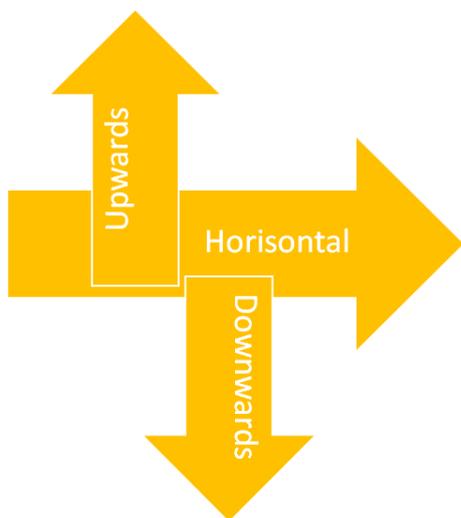
✤ **Upwards**: Donor wants documented changes at the level of the ultimate beneficiaries for accountability purposes.

✤ **Horizontal**: Information is generated to learn from and to inform future interventions.

✤ **Downwards**: Intervener is accountable to the needs of the final beneficiaries – to prove and stay relevant.

In the context of this paper, the horizontal relation seems to be rather overlapping with learning and relationships. So in this paper, we are only looking at two aspects of accountability:

upwards and downwards. Horizontal accountability is covered by the sections on learning and relationships.

4.1   RAM and accountability

A count of standards which have incorporated accountability measures or mechanisms shows that half of the standards reflect requirements related to upwards or downwards accountability. In actual programme interventions, it is particularly upwards accountability that leaps out in relation to retrospective results reporting (5 out of 10 standards), while downwards accountability is embraced in three prospective standards within strategic planning (context analysis, strategy development and planning, partnerships). It is noteworthy that downwards accountability cannot be identified as an expectation in relation to retrospective results reporting.

Accountability in complexity	
Strategic Planning:	
Standards/upwards: (8)	1/8
Standards/downwards: 1, 3, 6	3/8
Results reporting:	
Standards/upwards: 9, 10, 12, 13, 15	5/10
Standards/downwards:	
Strategic financing:	0/3
Standards:	
Role as Danish CSO:	
Standards/upwards: 22, 23, 24	3/3
Standards/downwards: 22, 23, 24	3/3
Total	12/24

... goal achievement ...	9/24

In the Standards related to the organisations' own identity as civil society organisations both upwards and downwards accountability is present.

The cross-cutting term of 'goal achievement' appears in nine out of the 24 standards and indicates a rather broad expectation to the organisations of being able to account for the extent of own goal achievement, also in areas which the organisations have not been used to manage in such a 'project-wise' manner.

4.2   Key words on accountability

The qualitative mapping of terminology used in the RAM in relation to accountability shows the following:

* A strong focus on results as regards <u>upwards accountability</u>. This is reflected in terms such as goal achievement, measure, contribution, changes, document, effects, developments, results.

* Predominance of relevance and relations as regards <u>downwards accountability</u>. Again this is reflected in the terminology of context analyses, approach to planning processes, engagement of partners, partners' strategic focus, taking account of views.

4.3   Accountability in practice

In practical terms, the following general observations across the organisations have been made:

* Upwards accountability:

    * The current level of planning and reporting has produced several examples on various parameters that can serve as a 'best practice' – or maybe more rightly as a 'best fit' in the current situation, since the context may change before next year's reporting is due.

    * Many organisations have reached a balanced documentation and plausible account of their contribution and attribution to the reported changes. In general, the virtue of honest

reporting seems to be adhered to, though very few cases of non-achievements are referenced.

   �; Accountability measurement is to a high extent adapted to suit the domain of social change as compared to output-oriented service delivery. This is reflected in extensive use of process indicators, qualitative reporting, case based narratives, most significant change stories, etc.

 �etc; Downwards accountability:

   �; A trend may be emerging emphasizing a change towards top-down driven planning and strategizing processes. In many cases, it is difficult to detect the role of partners and beneficiaries/rights holders in the strategic choices made in programming. The downwards relevance seems mainly to be secured through context analyses – and much less through alignment to partners' priorities.

   �; There seems to be a dilemma for the organisations in positioning themselves in the dynamics between the partners and the 'peers' in the international alliances. As elaborated above, this puts the current partnership model under pressure and distances the organisations from their partners. The result is a weakening of any downward accountability relations with partners.

   ✶ Post-programme accountability is becoming popular with an emphasis on mechanisms such as complaints mechanisms – which by nature are retrospective – as opposed to accountability relations, where an organisation makes itself available for feedback with an open mind and heart – and thereby acts more prospectively.

As mentioned above, this paper covers horizontal accountability in the sections on learning and relationships.

5 Adaptive capacity in complexity

A complexity aware approach presupposes the existence of organisational capacity to adapt to changing contexts and conditions, when and as needed. Engaging in change processes with a multiplicity of actors inevitably affect the individual actor: 'change and be changed'.

Adaptive capacity may be described in terms of willingness and efforts to self-renew own organisation; to take reflection from the level of project related interventions to the next level of wider organizational reflection; to translate learning into concrete actions; to create spaces to get together with partners and other actors and make collective sense of significant observations; and to submit to explicit reflection processes about internal organisational practices.

5.1 RAM and adaptive capacity

The 24 standards of the RAM portray quite a high level of expectation to the organisations as regards their capacity to adapt: in fact, 17 out of 24 standards are found to comprise elements of adaptive capacity requirements, and it is more or less equally represented in the four assessment areas.

Adaptive capacity in complexity	
Strategic Planning: Standards: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7	6/8
Results reporting: Standards: 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, (18)	7/10
Strategic financing: Standards: (20)	1/3
Role as Danish CSO: Standards: 22, 23, 24	3/3
Total	17/24

… measure against own targets …	8/24
… risk management …	9/24

Across the standards, two standardised terms are applied, which may be seen as proxy indicators or pointers of adaptive capacity: 'measuring against own targets' to track deviations and adapt strategies; and 'risk management' which are found in many different versions according to the particular standard and topic at hand. It is clear that flexibility and actions to remain relevant and effective are incentivized in the RAM standards.

5.2 Key words on adaptive capacity

The count and analysis of the RAM terminology on adaptive capacity found that the terms may be placed in four categories:

�֍ **Flexible programme management** is reflected in terms such as managing 'against own targets', identifying 'planned and unplanned changes', dealing with 'failures' and 'non-achievements' and remedial action.

✖ **Risk management** is conceptualised as an approach and a tool for adaptive capacity. It is a cross-cutting concern, presupposing that the organisations have an adequate risk management system in place. It is reflected in wordings like risk assessment, risk willingness, strategies for risk management in innovation, risk monitoring, risk management interventions, risk minimization, adaptation of strategies.

✖ **Capacity to respond to the context** is related to adaptive capacity and is expressed through wordings such as 'changing context', 'appropriate', 'adapting strategies', reading 'opportunities', 'capacity to respond to context', and reading of 'emerging trends'.

5.3 Adaptive capacity in practice

Across the board, organisations demonstrate only little adaptive capacity in their reporting. Despite a trend of improving the evaluation of own performance against targets, most organisations are less reflected about the causes of deviations (positive as well as negative) and present only few cases of resulting adjustment of programmes and adaption of organisational behaviour. Hence, the impression is that the organisations do not establish the initial basic information level that would serve as input into any adaptive organisational behaviour.

With regard to risk management, it appears to be either an organisational competence area, which is characterised by serious systemic weaknesses; or it is simply under-reported from the organisations.

Adaptation of programmes and strategies are evidenced on anecdotal basis, and is reported mainly from a situational point and predominantly case-based and not system-based.

6   Concluding remarks

The outcome of the current exercise of 'reading' the RAM tool – represented by the 24 standards – through the lenses of complexity has been interesting in the way that the RAM tool to a large extent is assessed to be 'complexity aware'. It embraces the qualities of the four essential dimensions in complexity awareness navigation: relationships, learning, accountability and adaptive capacity; and the RAM standards as such do not inhibit the organisations from working in a complexity aware manner or from honest reporting on how they navigate in complex situations to increase their own relevance and effectiveness. This is worthwhile mentioning, since the RAM tool was designed without this explicit approach as a reference background for framing the standards.

In practice, the **<u>strengths</u>** identified comprise the organisations' express multiplicity of stakeholders and partners, where the organisations demonstrate sensible navigation in complexity in constellations of change agents and drivers of change. A clear focus on influencing the international alliances produces results, but may also lead to a somewhat 'introvert' focus within the alliances. Indicators are predominantly relevant to the domain of social change. Well-known learning structures and instruments are in place and used on systematic basis, though primarily in a retrospective learning perspective (*'on action'*). The reporting satisfies in general upwards accountability considerations and has produced examples on good practice for honest reporting, while on the system side there seems to be a focus on post-programme accountability and primarily mechanisms. The 'engine compartment' seems to function satisfactorily.

The dominant **<u>challenges</u>** appear to be that the current partnership concept is being challenged by the global structures and alliances, where a tendency has been identified of upwards alignment to alliances and 'introvert' focus on influencing the alliances, where the organisations seem to be challenged on their positioning between the partners and the alliance. This may reinforce an undesirable top-down driven planning process; signs that could confirm this are observed in that downwards relevance and accountability relations appear to be less predominant in reports and plans. With regard to learning, challenges have been identified in making learning more concurrent and system-based, e.g. lifting it from the retrospective learning perspective and the situational piloting to *'in action'*-learning which integrates regular practice with critical reflections, appropriate learning indicators, learning monitoring, etc.

Some observations deserve **<u>further investigation</u>** before conclusion: The reporting leaves an impression that there is no substantial positive change in the power relation in the partnerships, and that the organisations do not carry out regular monitoring on the quality of the relations. There may be a risk of a renewed instrumentation of the partners, underpinned by the way donor requirements are perceived or interpreted. Prospective learning and innovation appears to be seriously underreported, and it would serve the purpose of incentivizing this area further to explore further, what the organisations' position is on this. The same applies to risk management, where a similar dilemma is observed in terms of either a competence weakness or serious under-reporting.