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CULTURES OF EVALUATION:

TALES FROM THE END OF THE LINE

ABSTRACT

Experiences in and around aid agencies suggest that the results agenda militates against a culture of learning and improvement to which evaluations should usefully contribute. In this paper I argue that this is an issue with both ethical and operational dimensions. The reductionist and simplifying effects of quantitative indicators of achievement as instruments of performance management, which I see as characteristic of audit culture, are having a pernicious effect in many aid environments. The technical and instrumental ways M&E is understood within the everyday culture of aid agencies preclude the space and time necessary for an ethically premised culture of learning. These social effects of audit culture detract from our capacity as a sector to deliver positive change, and should be of concern to evaluators, commissioners and consumers of evaluations.

Introduction: *from results based management to sausage numbers*

For a number of years, anthropologists and others have been concerned with the ways cultures of management and audit are affecting development (Mosse 2005, Eyben 2015, Shore and Wright 2015, Whitty 2015, Green 2011, Fukuda-Parr *et al* 2014). In this paper, based on experiences as an ‘observant participant’ (Green 2011) in the aid industry¹, I discuss some of the ways in which the trends towards results-based management (RBM) and other features of the new managerialism (Turner, Hulme and McCourt 2015) that have come to dominate the NGO sector over the last twenty years are having a profound impact on the way development results are conceived of and managed. These trends in management by audit have ethical implications, because of the ways in which they reduce and constrain the scope and kinds of thinking and research within aid agencies.

I argue that there are perverse incentives in RBM systems, which has led the ‘results agenda’ to produce its own “Frankensteinian offspring”. This includes a culture of results that prioritises quantitative data over understanding, and which generates operational cultures in which doing is prioritised over learning. The widespread use of assessments that can be quantified and measured has led to the production of numbers that have a life of their own, and whose methods of production can be coercive, and hide awkward truths, rather than reveal them (e.g. Shore and Wright 2015, Camfield 2015). This results culture is bound up with performance management systems that produce self-regulating subjects, whose work is often

¹ In line with this positioning, the observations made here are from time under contract to which conditions of corporate confidentiality apply, hence the non-specific nature of the remarks here.

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2 circumscribed by bureaucratic functions and structures rather than enabling holistic or learning focused
3 thinking. This has significant implications for ethics, circumscribing the ways aid practitioners can
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5 understand and engage with reflexive thinking about their work.
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10 **Sausage Fruit from the Results Tree**

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12 The wider culture of performance management via metrics can result in the exacerbation of the ‘numbers
13 games’, that are played periodically within development from crises around numbers of street children
14 (Ennew 2008) to refugees and migrants entering Europe today, or whenever a particular advocacy or
15 fundraising mission is identified. In development today these are exemplified in the “sausage numbers” that
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17 NGO workers report amongst their own work (Whitty 2015). They are sausages because no-one is quite sure
18 what is in them, on account of the methodologically flawed processes by which they are formulated². One
19 encounter I had with these involved the annual count of beneficiary numbers growing from the hundreds to
20 a few million. This had a positive effect on intra-agency perceptions of the programme to which they
21 corresponded, but more worryingly for internal managers, the numbers had also made it through multiple
22 ‘rigour checks’ before the error of a local partner’s interpretation of the counting guidance was identified.
23 No extra millions were in fact reached, but there they were, slipped through auditing checks and into the
24 annual report.
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33 Such problems may be the exception rather than the rule, but the systems that produce them are what are
34 in question. Indeed despite investment in M&E across the NGO sector, this increased attention has to a
35 large extent been focused on producing numbers of dubious accuracy rather than learning (Woodhill 2007).
36 Many years ago I was part of a tiny team of two members of staff with responsibility for managing global
37 results reporting in an INGO. After some restructures and in line with the new number games around
38 proving results and numbers of people reached by our work, our small team grew exponentially to five
39 posts. The change stemmed to promise new opportunities to get systems right and, at long last, the changes
40 which we did or didn’t achieve for beneficiaries would become paramount. M&E would be brought in from
41 end-of-project and technical obscurity to be a key driver for improving the effectiveness of future work.
42 M&E was even rebranded, with phrases and acronyms that often included learning, such as MEL. But our
43 optimism was brief, tempered by the fact this growth was accompanied by the announcement of a new kind
44 of metrics: counting beneficiaries. Protests that this would almost inevitably be methodologically unsound
45 were futile, and some years down the line, had led to the kinds of sausage fruit referred to above.
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58 ² These echo the ‘poor numbers’ ascription Jerven has given to statistics such as GDP in some African states, where the
59 errors in formulation mean they are not fit for purpose (2013).
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4 The scope of our work as M&E staff included managing both what is probably most readily understood as
5 evaluation in the aid community - externally researched and written end of project/ programme
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7 assessments of the workability and effectiveness of an approach, policy or programme – as well as other
8 processes more internal to aid agencies. This second type included products like annual reviews, project
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10 impact assessments, and country annual report components, done in-house according to internal policy on
11 reporting requirements, and managed within the kinds information management systems and cultures
12 described here.
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16 These latter kinds of work may be seen as a peculiarity or even anathema to external specialist professionals
17 that such processes are also categorised in the same set of practices as evaluation, given that they do not
18 often meet the strict standards of scientific rigour and validity as those worked on to an external audience
19 (even if they aspire to, while functioning within different and often severe resource constraints). So it is in
20 relation to both types of roles and products that I refer in this paper³.
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26 An example of the internal practices within which evaluation and evaluative cultures interact is a study a
27 colleague and I commissioned of what had happened to emergency response evaluations in an INGO over
28 the preceding years. The findings confirmed our instincts, and fears⁴. A significant number of them were
29 received via the practice of actively burying bad news, or simply shelved. In one example, a damning
30 evaluation was kept under a for-your-eyes only policy, shuffled between a few select desks on conditions of
31 secrecy. Failure is not an option in a results-driven culture, where success and delivery are all, carrying with
32 them reputations of both organisations and individuals that must be managed. Burying under the carpet
33 lessons that challenge the logframe or strategic plan becomes a tactical response under such conditions. A
34 corollary to this is the fact that learning is considered an abstract exercise rather than a foundational ethical
35 commitment, something that can be done with sufficient expertise but is tangibly separate from the day to
36 day work of an NGO, as exemplified in the ways it's compartmentalised within many INGOs. This includes, in
37 one NGO, an annual internal and lightly competitive process of sharing lessons that were small enough not
38 to risk damaging reputations, with wider parts of the organisation, such as how a project had incorrectly
39 targeted the wrong group of vulnerable people and needed to be reformed by learning from talking to
40 beneficiaries. While such learning endeavours were undoubtedly important, and indeed the competition
41 was an initiative to promote learning, but it was within a culture in which the very idea of learning had been
42 so squeezed out the everyday busy-ness of doing that it needed reinstating.
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55 ³ Indeed more work could be done to document these, expanding on the helpful comments of many such staff to
56 illuminate this sometimes murky area of practice in Whitty (2015), and consider both the synergies and differences
57 between such practices and the specialist professional work of the first category of work outlined above

58 ⁴ An assessment of DFID's learning processes had some similar conclusions about the use of learning from evaluative
59 processes there (ICAI 2014).
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4 **How did we get here?**
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7 The cultures inside aid agencies have played their part. Indeed the cultures of audit argument initiated by
8 Power (1997) has prompted further reflections on the systems (e.g. by Shore and Wright 2015) which
9 produce a picture of a results–driven audit culture. This culture is complete with Power’s ‘rituals of
10 verification’ in which the gaze of power narrowly reflects on what Eyben has termed “artefacts of evidence”
11 (2015), evaluative products, such as business cases or social returns on investment, that are ultimately
12 focused on value for money.
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15 This unfolding of culture occurs because “processes for assessment have social consequences, locking up
16 time, personnel and resources” (Strathern 2000: 2). These social consequences of audit include the de-
17 prioritisation of learning, with both a lack of space and time dedicated to it in the busy world of the modern
18 INGO. The detail of how staff time and bureaucratic processes are locked up is mundanely woven into the
19 everyday fabric of people’s work.
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24 A key effect is that time is systematically dedicated to generating the numbers required at the regular rituals
25 of verification (Power 1997) that are used for managing both people and programmes such as six monthly
26 performance reviews and annual quantitative indicator data collection exercises.
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29 In one large INGO, the annual rounding–up of quantified results data took up at least two months of the
30 working lives of country office M&E staff, and a similar amount of that of staff in head and programme
31 offices to collate and organise data. In addition to these processes, much of the preceding year would have
32 been given over to ensuring everyone understood the correct methods for inputting data for the indicators,
33 and ensuring that every programme and project was collecting the right data to pass on upwards (although
34 this was never perfect, hence the sausages). This data was organised and processed according to key
35 predetermined indicators, which were then passed higher up the ranks of management to those authorised
36 to interpret the data, in a manner not dissimilar to Harper’s (2000) observations of IMF data management
37 systems on country ‘fact missions’⁵. Here, Harper notes that rank and seniority determine who is allowed to
38 analyse the data ‘correctly’ and then sanction the relevant interpretations. Such processes privilege the
39 views from specific vantage points within managerial hierarchies. The active exclusion of multiple voices and
40 interpretations, echoes questions central to this volume’s discussion of ethics, and to where people’s rights
41 fit into the picture (see also Barnett and Munslow 2014). It also illustrates the processes by which data can
42 become increasingly concrete and powerful the further removed they are from their source (Camfield
43 2015).
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⁵ And echoing processes of calculation discussed in Mitchell’s (2002) account of governing Egypt and Rottenburg (2009)
59 on metadata.
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2 Such processes also raise questions about individuals' subjectivity in audited systems, as time is devoted to
3 doing and to being able to record the achievements of effort against individual and programme
4 performance metrics that constitute keystones of personnel and programme management. These processes
5 aim to produce individuals "who will calibrate their work and worth against their organisation's
6 performance indicators" (Shore and Wright 2015: 26). Whilst such compliance is not inevitable and NGO
7 workers may resist, and propose alternatives, changes and improvements to the way things are done, the
8 scope for this and the potential impact of such work depends on both management styles, and the kinds of
9 top-down strategizing and definitions of what counts as success or a result. The reality is also one in which
10 many aid staff work extremely long hours, in a competitive industry. They also often fit into a culture where
11 people are so busy doing, so that they can show they delivered, and that the programme achieved its
12 intended outputs and results, that there is often little time or space to think or reflect (Eyben 2015).
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14 These rituals of verification of quantified artefacts in a culture of audit are aligned to specific power
15 imbalances that recall the roots of audit in European feudal society, where it was a quintessentially unequal
16 affair (Shore and Wright 2000). While there are clearly profound differences between medieval hierarchies
17 and those inside aid agencies, the edifices of both the feudal audit and contemporary audit culture and
18 practices are constructed on foundations of mistrust (Douglas 1992, in Strathern 2000: 4). Such an ethos of
19 suspicion and doubt is in deep epistemological and ethical contrast to the more participatory approaches
20 that have in recent decades been an important counterpoint to power imbalances inherent in much
21 development intervention. While some evaluation practice today draws on these shifts (e.g. Cornwall
22 2014), this push upwards is against the might of hierarchical power and funding accountability, and its
23 quantified audit systems. We seem a long way from asking what evaluation look like if it was done by the
24 beneficiaries, for the beneficiaries, so they could choose who 'intervened' in their communities and not.
25 The kinds of ethics of commitment that might prevail in such circumstances would be both highly different
26 from evaluation as normal, as currently practiced, and provide a very different space for the articulation of
27 the meaning of development outcomes.
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Ethical Consequences: bitter fruit

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49 In this atmosphere of what I call 'metric madness', another INGO example includes annual programmatic
50 reports where learning was reduced to the space of a few sentences in a pre-designed Excel spreadsheet
51 (with macros locked), and whose nuggets of insight into how something had or hadn't worked could only be
52 accessed by disentangling the text from the surrounding numbers. These meanwhile, sought to measure
53 every possible area of effort, if not result. By focusing attention on that which can be counted, outputs
54 easily get called outcomes, the result of the expeditious use of M&E vocabulary to fit narrowing
55 management objectives and perspectives, in which simple results chains are key, and complexity too
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2 complicated. As such key results are kept to the simplest levels of outcome, with data coming directly from
3 programmes. In such data-generating systems, the proximity of data to the programme provides the key
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5 basis for its reliability, rather than being subject to external validation or scrutiny.
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7 The kinds of complex and subtle changes for beneficiaries that M&E practitioners like myself had dreamt of
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9 largely slipped back into our dreamscapes, where they had been before the large investment in results.
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11 Internally, M&E has in many places gone from obscurity directly to metrics, understood as a form of
12 performance management. Metrics has become the byword for success, and indeed the term is often used
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14 as a short-hand for M&E. What counts is very much what can be counted as Cornwall (2014, echoing
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16 Einstein), wryly observes.

17 A lack of time and space for learning thus persists amidst a reality in which M&E is still under-resourced,
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19 under-used, and misunderstood. For many esteemed colleagues, the bottom line was that M&E was boring,
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21 little more than a technical exercise in collecting and organising predetermined data. If monitoring is often
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23 a formal and ritualistic collecting and aggregating of data for donor reports, filed to collect dust until the
24 evaluator turns up, it is little coincidence that the M&E appears at the back of project proposals, and at the
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26 back of management budgets and priorities. Power's (1997) descriptions of colleagues' dim views of the
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28 interest of accountancy sound very familiar, and reinforce the parallel with technical auditing of figures.
29 Indeed the subcontracting by DFID of some programme management to large management consultancy
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31 firms whose roots are in accountancy underscores the extent to which management by numbers seems a
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33 plausible option within a reductionist view of what development entails, and seems to stem from a position
34 in which contextual understanding and technical expertise are irrelevances⁶. Given the concomitant
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36 emergence of debate within development circles about the need for flexibility, adaptation and complexity
37 of local context for successful interventions (e.g. Ramalingan 2012 and 'Doing Development Differently'),
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39 this seems a counter-intuitive move.

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41 Meanwhile however, the pressure on country office staff to produce the right numbers seems relentless.
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43 That task is also shared with partners, whose capacity to deliver the kinds of robust auditable figures the
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45 results agenda demands is often questionable. An example of the challenges of ensuring rigour in such
46 cascaded responsibilities is given by Pasano⁷ (2015), where the number of children reported by a partner is
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48 'sometimes'. Pasano's bewilderment at the array of ways partners record and count the outcomes of their
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50 efforts is indicative of the challenges of cascading down responsibility for reporting in audit focused
51 systems, where the kinds understanding of the methodology and systematic accounting practices required
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53 for accurate audit may simply not exist. Indeed it echoes the issues of translation and brokerage analysed
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56 ⁶ Indeed, Shore and Wright note the power of the 'Big 4' international consultancy firms, who via a range of services
57 segueing with the governance agenda, were operating in 140 countries with revenues of \$110 billion in 2011/12
58 (2015:25).

59 ⁷ This is a pseudonym, of an NGO worker writing for the Guardian development professionals website
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2 elsewhere in development practice (Mosse 2011, Olwig 2013) and raises its own set of practical (and
3 ethical) questions. Whilst such approaches evidence the messy contested and negotiated meanings of aid in
4
5 practice (Lewis and Mosse 2006, Rottenburg 2009), the power of numbers and the finance to discipline and
6
7 impose meanings across time and space constituted a powerful strand within such potentially disputed
8
9 terrains. As results culture is extended via the cascading of results production to the partners in developing
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11 countries, it is worth also noting the culturally disciplining and time-defining effects of this. The imposition
12
13 of definitions, metrics, and methods of what counts and how it is to be counted is not only a frontier of
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15 governmentality and power, but one whose confines produce dysfunctional consequences for both the
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17 audited organisations and the beneficiaries represented.

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19 Of course, one of the key reasons for the rise of the numbers game is the increased rigour demanded in
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21 accounting for funds, and to donors, and of donors to their tax payers. In many instances, NGO and CSO
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23 partners have to report to multiple donors, from multilaterals to ministries, and a small organisation may
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25 find the tasks of collecting the data for the specific indicators and other metrics demanded of each donor
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27 NGO a significant task. The likelihood that they will have much flexibility in what data they are allowed to
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29 collect, and with what methodologies is often quite low given the top down nature of reporting
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31 requirements.

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33 A key problem produced by management by results, and cultures of audit, is that such processes of
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35 negotiation, and of translation, are subject to being funnelled back to the pre-determined numbers that the
36
37 RBM systems have *a priori* determined as meaningful, correct and relevant. The values that matter, which
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39 count, are those of the audit derived system, and the histories and lessons produced by the vast social
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41 networks and brokerage processes by which development is really enacted, are written out of the history of
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43 development.

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45 In theory, NGOs could be in a position to challenge the logic, when faulty, of donors, and to provide a fix to
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47 the broken feedback loop in the relationship between donors and recipients, whereby donors “impose
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49 decision on recipients without the latter having a say in the process” (Martens 2006: 694). This pivotal role
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51 for NGOs would be fine, if it worked; and the suggestions evoked from the results agenda and audit culture
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53 are that it often does not. NGOs role is also subject to wider debate within development (e.g. Banks Hulme
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55 and Edwards 2015), with some arguing that within the broader politics of development NGOs have become
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57 too in thrall to donors, and lost their critical voice and perspective⁸. This means they may fail to play the key
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59 communicative role between donors and recipients that Martens envisions, or in the views of those with a
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61 more radical agenda, act to have the transformative social effects that others aspire of them (Banks Hulme
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63 and Edwards 2015). Arguably, if processes such as participation have been manipulated into forms of co-

⁸ This is of course a much wider debate which here I can only hint at.

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2 optation for beneficiaries, so too they have for NGOs talking their seats at the tables of power in New York
3 and Geneva, and in taking money become complicit in the political machinations of their paymasters
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7 There are fundamental questions about power here, and who is left out of these processes of knowing (and
8 sometimes learning) is important. Access to knowledge is also about access to power, and although many
9
10 organisations now publish evaluations on their websites, this act of openness is not the same as honest
11 internal discussion about the findings. Furthermore, evaluations can be for and about donor priorities rather
12 than programmatic learning agendas. Evaluations may carry the robust qualities of scientific rigour and
13
14 external validation, but often in so doing can neglect the more procedural ‘how’ questions from which
15 better practices be drawn⁹. Good practice needs to be about ensuring staff can be involved in at least some
16
17 evaluation processes so they too can contribute to and learn from them, and discuss their findings.
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20 However such approaches require a kind of flexibility that is in many instances at odds with the bureaucracy
21 that is seen to characterise many aid organisations¹⁰. Within the busy everyday practise of agencies, and
22
23 given the internal political weight evaluations can carry, both time and hierarchy may conspire to prevent all
24 those who might find evaluations useful from being able to access them. Evaluations are also rarely
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26 translated into the languages of project staff, let alone beneficiaries. The result is that many people are left
27 out of discussion about learning, and most certainly the intended beneficiaries.
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32 33 **Conclusions**

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36 The ethical premises of audit culture stand in stark contrast to an ethos of learning and openness that are at
37 the foundations of an ethical practise in development. The implications for learning as sketched out above
38
39 are about the ways in which organisational cultures and daily working practices in aid may be malignly
40
41 affected by the pressures of management or governance by numbers.
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43 The independent and objective nature of evaluative analysis means it can easily be managed according to
44
45 hierarchical and exclusive management structures. In the current culture of results inside many aid
46 organisations, knowledge generated by external evaluations risks being neglected.
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49 Audit culture’s relentless focus on quantifiable results sits at odds with thinking and working in ways where
50 learning by mistakes is valued. Regular, participatory and active monitoring are undeniably a logistical
51
52 challenge in many contexts, but also a challenge to the status quo in many areas of practice, which is likely
53
54 to be the more significant challenge in pressured management by results environments. Instilling an
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56 ⁹ Noting of course that TORs and the quality their execution are amongst the many variables affecting the quality and
57 utility of evaluative reports.

58 ¹⁰ As per in an interesting account of the use of Political and Economic Analysis (PEA) in DFID and the World Bank by
59 Yanguas Gil and Hulme (2015)
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2 ethically premised culture of learning requires tackling the questions of what kinds of knowledge are valued
3 within organisations. It means making time and space within work programmes and scheduled to think
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5 reflexively, openly and with a view to learning. Organisations need to value what staff learn about how
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7 mistakes are made, and how they can be fixed. Changes to the way evaluations are understood and used
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9 requires a cultural shift away from neo-liberal management techniques and cultural practices that promote
10 doing, to ones that promote learning, collaboration and understanding.
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