



Canadian Evaluation Society

A proposal for international arrangements for the development of program evaluation

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INTRODUCTION

This paper makes a specific proposal for the creation of international arrangements for the development and promotion of program evaluation as an essential function within government and the voluntary sector.

This subject has received considerable attention within the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) within the last few months. In March, the National Council established an ad hoc committee to investigate and report on the matter, and CES provincial chapters and individual members have submitted their views on it. In May, the CES Annual Conference included a panel session devoted to it. The National Council has considered the matter further and hereby makes the following proposal to the governing bodies of other national evaluation organizations.

FACTORS

In preparing this proposal, the CES National Council has taken several factors into account:

- 1) The evaluation profession throughout the world faces two major challenges: to convince governments and the voluntary sector of the contribution that evaluation can make to informed decision making, and to strengthen the competence of the evaluation practitioners who aspire to make that contribution. Call the first challenge *advocacy* and the second *professional development*.

- 2) National evaluation organizations have been trying to respond to these challenges for many years now. For them, one question is whether the resources - money and volunteer time - that an *international* organization¹ would require would be better spent at the national level. At first glance, an international organization should be able to offer national organizations the economies that would flow from a reduction in the duplication of the efforts that each makes to achieve its own goals. But an international organization could also bring with it the diseconomies inherent in distance, in unfamiliarity with each of the national scenes, and in a set of priorities that differ somewhat from those of each national organization²
- 3) It's impossible to say at this time for which functions (if any) an international organization would be generally more cost-effective than national organizations.
- 4) The question of relative economies applies even where the goal is to strengthen the evaluation profession in developing countries. To those who have longstanding bilateral arrangements for this purpose, it is by no means self-evident that the multilateral approach provided by an international organization would be superior.
- 5) The attitude of most of our members towards an international *organization* appears to vary from indifference to pronounced skepticism and even opposition. . However, although very likely in a minority, a number of Canadian evaluators believe that such a body could make a substantial contribution to evaluation and therefore support its creation. However, a much greater number, perhaps even a substantial majority, would likely support the idea of international *cooperation*. We expect that this same range of opinion is found in other national organizations.

¹ The term "international organization" is used here in its most general sense. It implies neither a complex or elaborate structure nor any subordination of the national organizations to the international one.

² Even in the best case, the priorities of an international organization will tend to reflect a sort of global "mean", whereas the priorities of individual national organizations will be on one or other side of that mean.

- 6) Many other related professions – accountants, internal auditors, government auditors, management consultants, psychologists, and operational researchers – have formed international organizations. Each largely serves the purposes of advocacy and professional development, including the provision of assistance to the professions in the developing countries. They do this in part by the familiar means of conferences, the development of professional standards, training programs and publications. Whatever reservations evaluators may have about the cost-effectiveness of an international organization, those reservations do not appear to be shared by these other professions.

However, these professions are different in important ways from evaluation, so that their international experience may be of limited relevance to us. One difference is the size of the membership and thus resources: at the extreme, one of the psychology associations indirectly represents 350,000 (sic) members³. Another difference is that they are mostly professions that certify the competence of their members and, at least in two important cases (the internal auditors and management consultants), the international organizations are largely devoted to that function.

PROPOSAL

These several factors have led us to make the following proposal.

- 1) Act now while there is a groundswell of interest in international cooperation, if not in an international organization. True, we are unsure about what, if anything, it makes sense to do at the international level, but we still believe that the benefits to each national organization and its members are sufficiently promising to try the idea out. Let's learn by doing.

³The budgets vary considerably. The figures run from a low of about US\$150,000 (Union of Psychologists and the "Supreme Auditors") to US\$6 million (Institute of Internal Auditors). Comparisons are much complicated by uncosted amounts of "in-kind" contributions; for example, some of the member organizations of the Supreme Auditors specialize in various areas: Austria provides the general secretariat and Canada (the Office of the federal Auditor General) apparently supports training activities.

Start with the most obvious international roles and see what results can be produced with what resources.

- 2) Don't invest heavily in organizational infrastructure. Find an ad hoc but effective means of seeing what's possible. Try it incrementally, and let it evolve in ways that actual experience justifies. Maybe it will naturally evolve into a much more formal and structured institution, one which might in due course even provide for individual memberships. Or maybe less formal, less structured arrangements will be found to be entirely adequate. In any event, at least for now, don't divert substantial voluntary effort or money from the existing activities of national organizations.
- 3) Specifically, do the following:
 - a) Appoint one of the national organizations to take the lead for, say, three years.
 - b) Ask that lead national organization to create a task force of members who are especially committed to international activities but who are not heavily involved in the work of the national organization. Indeed, to minimize the potential for conflicts of interest, the rule should be that current members of the task force will not serve in any office of a national organization.
 - c) Ask the lead national organization to choose as the task force leader a person who is well known and respected abroad for her/his professional and organizational skills and creativity.
 - d) Ask each of the other national organizations to appoint one person to serve on the task force. These people would supplement those appointed by the lead national organization and would serve as the primary point of contact between the task force and the national organizations. Those appointed to the task force would all have to be competent in two international languages.
 - e) Assign to the task force the mission of facilitating information exchange and collaboration among national evaluation organizations for the benefit of each. Information exchange and collaboration - "networking and learning from others" in the words of one of our chapters - could be achieved in various ways: by, for example, the holding of regional or even global

conferences⁴, the development of a core body of knowledge as the basis for a strong professional development program and the development of the techniques of advocacy (the two latter activities both of much current interest to the CES).⁵

The task force will have to investigate and decide on the priorities for the use of its own resources (volunteer time as well as money) taking account of the priorities of the participating national organizations and assessing the effectiveness of each potential use of its resources. Much, if not most, of the facilitation will be at a sub-global level, perhaps involving no more than two or three national organizations. The task force will also have to find the best methods for carrying out its facilitation role. In selecting the methods, it should bear in mind the costs of interpretation and translation that might be required for each such method.

- f) Emphasize to the task force that, in general, it should only *facilitate* information exchange and collaboration, not participate in it as a principal.⁶ For example, it will be the members of national organizations whom the task force has brought together, not the task force members, who will produce a regional journal, organize a conference, or jointly develop a core body of knowledge or advocacy techniques. Even more so, it will be the members of a country's national organization, not the task force members, who will *use* the core body of knowledge or the advocacy techniques in that country.
- g) Ask the task force to develop, for the review and approval of the participating national organizations, an initial work plan and related budget. This work will require some financing and the CES will be ready to contribute Cdn\$1000 for this purpose.

⁴ Or maybe by an "international" component of a major national conference.

⁵ Perhaps, by means of a global inventory of evaluators, the task force might foster the creation of international consortia for the conduct of especially large evaluations. In this case, the potential for conflicts of interest faced by task force members would need to be addressed.

⁶ A possible exception to a purely facilitative role would be advocacy directed at international organizations, including those in the UN system.

- h) Then ask the national organizations to each make a voluntary money contribution to the approved budget. They could each make this from either their regular budgets and/or possibly from special funds to which their members could in turn make voluntary supplementary payments. Financial commitments to the task force should be made sufficiently early to allow it to plan effectively each year.

Perhaps helped by the good offices of one of more strategically placed members, the task force might also be able to obtain supplementary funding from foundations, national governments, and international organizations. Bear in mind however that so much of the facilitation role can be effectively handled by email and that therefore a lot of money may be unnecessary. Again, the task force will have to periodically re-estimate its money needs in the light of its investigations and experience.

- i) Ask the task force to report annually to the presidents of the national organizations on its activities and expenditures. Among other things, this will reflect the principle that the task force is subordinate to the national organizations. If any national organization were dissatisfied with the performance of the task force and unable to improve it, then it could always “vote with its feet”, by ceasing to contribute its money and other support.