

# **Elements for Effective ICSW National Councils**

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Gerry Fox, Special Adviser to ICSW

### **Abstract**

*This paper provides background on the role, function and key elements of successful ICSW National Councils. It explores the need for Councils to identify clear values, goals, purpose and identity and provides a checklist to support Councils in being more effective.*

### **Why Have National Councils?**

The general goal of social development could be characterised as improved human well-being. Social development involves many sectors or components of organized activity. Much activity tends to occur within particular sectors (e.g. housing, agriculture, social welfare, transport). However, action in one sector always depends on action and/or the level of development in other sectors. Action in one sector always creates effects in other sectors.

This inter-relatedness and inter dependence is obvious in multi-sectoral programmes yet it is often ignored in practice as many failures of apparently worthwhile projects demonstrate (e.g. wells creating deserts, marketing projects without transport routes). We need ways to help make sure that action in one sector is complemented and reinforced by action in other sectors, rather than suffering from cross-purpose or unnecessary ignorance of essential factors.

Obviously, social development also involves a broad range of organisations with different histories, objectives and methods; and a wide range of people with different experience, skills and ideas. Much of the effort of this diverse range of actors is and must be separate and often to some degree, specialized. There are elements too of competition and conflict due to both organisational and philosophical divergence.

However, the organisations and practitioners who comprise the social development sector do have some common goals and they face many similar problems and issues. The sector as a whole has interests, which can only be effectively advanced through concerted joint effort to clarify, define and pursue them. Just as commercial rivals collaborate in business association or different trade unions through national associations so too do social organisations need mechanism for collective action.

### **The Benefits of Collaboration**

National Councils aim to provide this mechanism for collective action. Collaboration among those involved in social development can produce a wide range of benefits: for the practitioners; for the sector as a whole; and for the people and communities for whom social development efforts exist. Some examples of these benefits include:

- More comprehensive and reliable needs assessment through sharing of varied experiences, perspectives and data.
- More efficient use of resources through avoidance of duplication and repetition of effort; and by learning from each other's failures and successes.
- Improved development and application of skills through joint training courses, working groups and seminars, sharing techniques and approaches based on experience.
- Development and promotion of policies and standards for the sector, improving service quality and protecting the interests of effective agencies.
- Greater impact in public awareness-raising and on government social policies through concerted presentation of agreed priority issues and objectives.
- Combining experience, skills and resources of several organisations to create development opportunities and programmes.
- Preparation of resources banks and information systems drawing on input and providing services from many agencies, thus improving the database for planning of all participants.

### **Origins, Structure and Membership**

National Councils bring together, directly or indirectly, all or most of the organisations involved in social development activity in their country. A National Council's membership will include at least most of the national-level agencies operating in the fields of social welfare, human services, community development and social policy

National Councils are often called 'umbrella' or 'peak' councils because they 'cover' the whole social sector in their goals, their programmes and their members. They are also national in scope, not limited to any particular area or sector.

### **Origins of National Councils**

National Councils can have a variety of origins. Some come from:

- The non governmental agencies within a country
- The national government ministry responsible for social affairs
- Combined efforts of NGOs and government out of their previously *ad hoc* collaborative arrangements.
- Key individuals in leadership roles in social development who have heard of or seen Councils operating elsewhere.
- Pressure for a collaborative structure either to handle an emergency or crisis situation in a country, or to respond to a major external initiative for assistance to the country's social development.

## Structures of National Councils

There are some common or typical Council structures. Although the specific form may differ from country to country, it is usual and expected to find that a Council has the following key structural features:

- **A membership of independent organisations** with equal membership rights. The members may or may not be divided into different categories (by geographic areas, function, target group, level of operation- there are various models).
- **A governing body** which is representative of the membership, elected by them regularly and accountable to them in some direct form.
- **A secretariat**, which implements Council activities and programmes. The size of secretariats differs enormously. It may be comprised only of paid staff or may have a large number of volunteer staff also. It may be one integrated unit, or it may coordinate different “sub secretariats” split up geographically or functionally.

## Membership of National Councils.

There are three areas in which membership tends to differ between National Councils:

- Whether the Council has only non-governmental (NGO) or voluntary agency members, or alternatively has a mixture of NGOs and Government Ministries/Departments.
- Whether the Council has only national level organisations as full members, or alternatively has members from all levels (e.g. including local community groups)
- Whether the Council includes all other sectoral coordinating (or umbrella) bodies as members, or alternatively is the “first among equals” with other coordinating bodies which are independent (e.g. coordinating bodies in aged, disabled, health areas)

## Roles of National Councils

The overarching aim of National Councils is to promote and facilitate social development through goals and practices based in equity and justice that will improve the well being of all people in society. The particular roles of National Councils, which describe their special contribution to the social development process, are:

- **Coordination:** to create and foster a collaborative environment among sectors of society and social development agencies, and to provide processes and mechanisms for cooperation for social development.
- **Service:** to facilitate and initiate measures which will support and enhance the capacities of social development agents – whether governmental, NGO or community.
- **Innovation:** to utilize the collective experience, knowledge and skills of the social development sector in order to develop and promote new ideas and practices which will advance the purpose of social development and the interests of people.

## Functions of National Councils

As is to be expected, the many differences between Councils are also reflected to some degree, in their functions. Not all Councils do the same things.

However, Councils are more similar in their actions than in almost any other feature. The differences are frequently one of emphasis and degree in how a particular function is implemented, or of different balances among the range of functions, which Councils carry out.

Some of the more common functional areas in which differences between Councils are frequently observed would include:

- **Policy leadership and advocacy:** all councils play some role in developing social policies and advocating them to government, the public and other key sectors. However, for some councils, this is a major primary role and the council becomes a highly visible public policy lobby group. For others, it is only one among a range of functions, and policy advocacy occurs quietly and more subtly. (The political culture of the country is one influence here, but is not always the determining factor).
- **Membership services and development:** Many types of council today offer a range of NGO Development programmes and other support services to their members, especially top NGOs providing social programmes. These include NGO management training, consultancy and advisory services, information resource banks, support for programme development, and assistance with donors. However, for other Councils, this function is only an incidental and occasional activity.
- **Fund raising and grant support:** this is one area, which often creates conflict about the role of a Council. All Councils involve themselves one way or another in promoting greater funding for social development, and NGO work in particular. Some Councils will actively assist particular members obtain funding; others will provide general support and advice to all NGOs. A few Councils are actively involved in obtaining funds (grants or community fund raising) and their distribution to NGOs. Many Councils however believe that a direct National Council role in grant-making is counter-productive for the coordinating function which is central to Council's purposes.
- **Implementation of general programmes or projects:** this is another area in which strong differences of opinion occur. Most Councils will not run social programmes or projects. They may work with members to develop a new service on the basis that it is run by an existing member. Some Councils will implement a new service but only as a pilot project for a limited time. A few Councils have direct involvement in running one or more social development programmes or services. Frequently, this creates conflict with at least some members, who believe it places a Council in a competitive role with them and detracts from the 'neutral' stance required for the effective promotion of collaboration and cooperation.

## **Key Elements of a Successful National Council**

Experience in Councils in all regions and many countries suggests that there are a set of key elements which are vital to the effective and successful functioning of any National Council. It will:

- **Have a high degree of consensus around a small set of objectives**, which arise from and give reality to the Council's purpose and identity.
- **Have a sound understanding of the social and organisational environment** in which the Council exists – and its functions and programs will be responsible to this environment.
- **Have good linkages and relationship with its member organisations**, which are actively involved in and committed to the Council and its programs.
- **Play a key role in a broader collaborative national network** which links across different social sectors and reaches all levels of social organisations.
- **Have an effective and open communication system** and efficient information services, which deliver appropriate, succinct, targeted and useful information to members and network.
- **Have a competent, committed, well-organized and democratic leadership team** of elected officers, committee members and staff.
- **Have flexible, efficient and action focused management structures** and processes, which provide the Council with sound planning, decision-making and implementation capacities.
- **Have an adequate and diversified resource base**, which provides reliable core-funding under Council control as well as project funding. Resources will be utilized to the maximum through efficient and disciplined procedures and creative imaginative strategies.
- **Have inbuilt processes for organisational growth** and adaptation, which ensure that there is an appropriate synthesis of continuity and change in the Council's life cycle.
- **Have a well-balanced set of programs**, which reflect the interest of disadvantaged groups, Council members and the Council itself that advance equally the Council's role of coordination, membership service and innovation; and are appropriate to the capacities and limitations of the Council.

## ***VALUES IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT***

### **The Values Arena for National Councils**

Values are the principles we hold most important, the guidelines which we believe should be followed in all aspects of life, the qualities by which we distinguish what we call “good”. The goals we seek and promote in life reflect our values. A person’s most basic or fundamental values are reflected in what they do in life, not only what they say.

In working for social development, the practices we follow and the programmes we develop arise from and reflect the basic values we hold and the goals we desire for society. Our actions also exert an influence on the values and goals of other people and institutions and therefore on the directions in which our society develops.

National Councils find themselves at the interfaces of three arenas in which social values and goals are formulated and pursued. These arenas are: the arena of individual people, their families and their immediate communities; the arena of structures and institutions whose objectives and programs are directly concerned with promoting and realizing social development; and the arena of society as a whole, most commonly defined today as the nation and state.

National Councils find themselves at the interfaces between these three arenas and values/goals dimensions because of their particular position and roles within social development. Most councils today, especially those with strong networks and a recognized status, deal with:

- **The interface between Government and social agencies:** for example creating opportunities for collaboration, interpreting agency needs to policy makers, assisting Government in policy development, and helping agencies understand Government priorities.
- **The interface between communities and Government:** for example, acting as advocates of community concerns and aspirations and helping communities to understand Government objectives and utilize Government services and resources.
- **The interface between social agencies and communities:** for example promoting dialogue and debate about community participation in development and implementation of social programs; promoting or understanding research into community needs for use by agencies; and enabling disadvantaged groups establish their own organisations for advocacy and programs.

### **The Challenge of Developing a Value Position**

Like all other organisations, Councils need to carefully review and critically reflect upon the values which confront them as agents of social development.

They need to formulate value positions, to identify themselves with an explicit set of values, which will be the basis of and provide guidance for their operations and

programs. Perhaps especially because they are a focal point of arenas and organisations with values in conflict, at least in the short term, Councils need their own ‘value anchors’ - or else they may find themselves drifting from one position to another depending on the changing strength of influence upon them.

If a Council becomes identified solely, or even predominantly, with only one of the arenas we have identified, then for practical purposes it ceases to have an ‘interface role’. It will be regarded by the arena with which it identifies as its special agent - and it will be regarded by the other arenas as a sectional force, biased against them. Similarly, a Council which becomes identified with one group of agencies within the social development arena loses substantially its co-coordinating capacity within the sector as a whole.

### **Processes for Developing Value Positions**

A national Council must develop its value set and its social goals through processes of communication, consultation and dialogue with all of its membership constituency and with all arenas and sectors of society. This is not just a matter of asking for views and opinions, nor is it a ‘census’ of opinion to determine majority views. This is a process of dialogue – which involves openness to alternative perceptions of the world, investigation of different values and goals in order to understand them, promotion of exchange among agencies and sectors, and constructive discussion of different positions based on mutual respect.

Through such a process of consultation and dialogue a National Council will be seeking for a number of things which will inform its own decision-making, such as:

- Identifying common and compatible values and goals across organisations and sectors, which are often obscured by different perceptions of each other’s positions and conflicting short term interests.
- Identifying values and goals and approaches to development which may indeed be different and even at times in conflict, but which can actually co-exist in complementary ways within a broader framework.
- Identifying from a pragmatic perspective the common obstacles and opposing forces which prevent the realization of different values and goals (sometimes we argue about what will happen “after”, more than we concentrate on working together to remove common obstacles to either of our desired goals).
- Identifying, or formulating basic value positions/value sets and broad social goals which constitute or create a framework within which apparently opposing positions may be seen as actually alternative paths to a same or similar end.

This process is not designed to produce values and goals which are so vague as to be meaningless, nor to produce a weak “lowest common denominator” position. Indeed the reverse is more likely to be the case if the process is undertaken properly. It should result in a distillation of essential and basic values separated out from the more immediate strategic considerations, special interests and necessary limited perception of all the different organisations and arenas involved in social development

Another aspect of a Council's values and goals which affect their development is the need for them to be developmental. A Council's value set should be concerned with process as well as with end-goals. Social development is itself a process. The Council's values should be concerned with how society moves from where it is now to a position of increased well-being for its people. They should incorporate respect for genuine differences of position and influence even while challenging and pointing the way for change.

### **Developing a Value Position – some key issues**

The values we hold, the social goals to which we are committed, are reflected concretely, and most accurately, in the positions we take and implement on specific social development issues. Whether or not we have a statement of values and goals, others will assess what our values and goals actually are by what we decide and do in practice about issues. And we actually formulate many of our value positions and goals by working through concrete issues with which we decide to deal.

The criteria suggest themselves for determining the key issues or areas in which the Councils will develop value positions and goals:

- Issues directly related/interwoven with the role of being a 'Council', on which positions are essential to guide any action by Council. Examples could include:
  - > **Coordination and Collaboration** – What priority should be given to promoting coordination and collaboration in development planning and programming, given the realities of competing agency interests? Should collaborative projects be given priority in support to donors? Can collaboration be effectively encouraged through making it a requirement?
  - > **People's Participation** – how does a Council reconcile the goal of increasing participation in development planning and decision making with constant pressures for "efficiency" and immediate results (participation usually takes time)? How much priority does a Council give to supporting self-help and community groups, especially when there may be short-term conflict between their interests and those of established social agencies?
- Issues which involve setting social goals which significantly determine the framework for and directions of social development policy and practice in the country. Examples of these issues could include:
  - > **Self Reliance** – is self-reliance a feasible goal in a complex and interdependent world? How do you balance the advantage of 'getting things going' with external dependence, against the longer-term viability of programmes which are locally initiated and resourced? Can aid programmes be designed and administered so that they do allow and encourage self-determination and self motivation by recipients, and foster rather than destroy creative development of local resources?
  - > **Meeting Basic Needs or Promoting Social Justice** – Should development programmes be directed at overcoming crisis poverty situations like providing basic needs supplements to the disadvantaged? Or should social

programmes be focused on restructuring inequitable structures and relationships? Why are these objectives frequently in conflict? Are there ways around this?

- A limited number of specific issues which the Council believes to be of critical importance and high priority in that country at that time. These are not necessarily the most "popular" issues of the moment (e.g. the latest international Year of...) Indeed such priority issues may well be things which much of the social sector/society is ignoring for one reason or another, but which should not be ignored. For example:
  - > In developed countries it is difficult to get serious discussions of 'North/South' issues at a time when social welfare is under threat at home. North/South issues tend to be seen as a question of aid, at best. Yet there are many links between North/South issues and the future of social welfare. Do we wish to preserve the current form of social welfare if it depends on continuing economic systems which exploit developing countries? What are the alternatives for a most just world in North and South?

### ***PURPOSE AND IDENTITY***

There is a saying that "if you don't know where you are going, how will you know if you have arrived?" Another side of the same issue is "if you don't know where you are going you are unlikely to arrive". When we are talking about a group of people going somewhere together, it is also likely that unless we all know where the group is going then we are likely to end up in different places.

### **Setting Goals**

Setting goals is about determining where we are going. A goal is a statement of something we want to achieve, a position we plan to reach. Goal setting is the process of clarifying, deciding, and starting what we want to achieve.

The pressures generated by the unique position of National Councils makes goal setting particularly important. For example:

- Councils usually have a very diverse membership, with differing and sometimes conflicting aims. Unless the Council's own purpose and aims are clear, firm and widely accepted it is likely to be pulled in different directions by changing alliances among members.
- A Council needs a strong and cohesive constituency to support its role, otherwise it has no legitimacy. The diversity of a council's membership especially requires effective goal setting processes which will create the consensus necessary for such support to be developed and maintained amidst such a wide variety of separate interests.
- Councils operate at the interfaces between different arenas and sectors of society. To preserve their unique role and position councils have to be able to withstand

pressure from various sectors from time to time, which will often be stronger than differences among members. A council's integrity as an organisation depends on there being broad consensus about its purpose.

- All organisations are affected by special events such as U.N International Years; by the fact that some social issues become the unbalanced focus of popular attention from time to time; or by sharp changes of Government policy for reasons that have nothing to do with social development priorities. However, National Councils are particularly vulnerable to such pressures and their capacity to divert attention from on going programmes, because of the Council's central and generalist roles. (For example Councils tend to be directly affected by all international years, where most social agencies are affected by only those which relate to their area.)
- Because Councils have broad concerns across the whole field of social development there is constant pressure for them to take up a wide range of issues (this is sometimes used as a way of preventing conflict – do everything so everyone is partially satisfied). Clarity about purposes, and constant setting and rehearsal of goals, can help avoid this tendency to spread efforts in so many directions that each becomes ineffective.

There are different levels and types of goals. Goals can range from the general to the specific in content, form, open-ended (or broad) to closed (or targeted) in scope, can be either process or outcome focused, and they can be long, medium or short term in their time-frame.

At the most general level, it is what we will call the “purpose” of the organisation. Sometimes this is called the mission statement. It defines its role and in general terms how this will be pursued. Statements of purpose or mission are rarely precise or specific; they do not say “we will do this, there, then”. However they are still goals, they describe an organisation's purpose and tends to remain constant for longer periods than its more operational goals.

At the next level is what we will call “Aims” – they are often called “organisational goals”. These are more specific statements of what the organisation plans to achieve towards its purpose. Aims are the kind of goals that are found in three year plans, giving targets for achievement in each major area of activity, and for each year of the plan or programme.

The final level of goals is what we will call “objectives. These are short term, very specific goals which serve as” stepping stones” toward achievement of the Aims. Effective objectives need to be *SMART*:

#### **SMART Objectives**

<b>Specific:</b>	What precise objective do you intend to achieve?
<b>Measurable:</b>	Will you be able to measure or observe your results?
<b>Achievable:</b>	Given the resources and skills available to you, are you convinced that the objective can be achieved by your organisation and its allies?
<b>Realistic:</b>	Given the context and the size of the problems, is it possible?
<b>Time-bound:</b>	When is your objective going to happen?

Goals are a key factor in giving an organisation the cohesion and identity it needs to survive and grow.

- They provide the framework for the development of the organisation’s programmes
- They are the basis for determining what type and scale of resources the organisation requires
- They provide the framework for resource allocation and priority setting among the organisation’s activities.
- They are a public statement of the organisation’s intentions, and therefore a key factor in raising support and in creating networks and alliances.
- They provide the basis for evaluation of the organisation’s activities and accountability to its constituency

#### **Establishing a Strong Sense of Purpose**

How does a National Council create useful goals and ensure that these contribute to a strong sense of the Council’s purpose? What are the key factors in effective goal- setting?

Things which will help achieve these key attributes include:

- Council Personnel (officers, volunteers and staff) keeping always in close contact and dialogue with the Council’s membership and other networks, and up to date with current social issues and activity. The Council must be close to those people, agencies and needs for which it exists. (In the commercial world one key attribute of successful companies is that they are ‘close to the customer’).
- There must be the fullest involvement of all personnel, members and networks of the Council in the processes of goal setting and review. Initiatives must be sought and welcomed from the “bottom up” and (from all sides), as well as from those in leadership positions. All members should be consulted and given opportunity to comment on proposed goals and directions.

- The purpose and major aims of the Council must always be the focus of every aspect of the Councils work and life. Every activity, however small, should be related to achieving the Council's purpose and one or more of its aims. People must be able to understand how their contribution, whatever it may be, has significance. And they must have opportunity to communicate their ideas on how the Council's purpose can be better advanced.
- The Council's purpose needs to be continually affirmed and 'rehearsed,' both within and outside the Council. This includes things such as taking time at each Annual Meeting, in different ways to emphasize why the Council exists and how its programmes serve this purpose. And ensuring that all new members and contacts are fully introduced to the Council's purpose and aims, and how this have been developed and pursued over time (Council history), and what are the future plans.
- The Council needs to celebrate its achievements and successes, deal constructively with its failures and mistakes and create incentives which generate commitment to the Council and its purpose. Success and achievement are great reinforcers of a sense of purpose, but they have to be given recognition. Failures and mistakes can also be positive if they are faced openly and learnt from. The old saying that "an organisation which never makes a mistake never does anything" is very true.

If these approaches are followed then the Council can be sure it has the basis for effective goal setting and the creation and maintenance of consensus around its purpose and aims.

### ***TWELVE KEY QUESTIONS (A Checklist for all organisations)***

#### **1. WHY DOES OUR ORGANISATION EXIST?**

This question raises the issue of the overall GOALS and purpose of the organisation, in this case a National Council. This question should not have to be debated every time we meet or discuss a new programme or activity. However it is relevant to every new development. It is a question which should be in the back of our mind always, and it is one of the criteria to use in deciding whether or not we should take up a new programme (or stop doing an old one).

#### **2. WHAT DOES OUR GROUP WANT TO ACHIEVE?**

Here we are concerned with the specific OBJECTIVES of the proposal under discussion. Can we specify not only generally why we want to do something (which Q.1 answers), but the concrete results we wish to achieve by doing this particular thing. Objectives are targets which can be measured as to whether or not they have been achieved. This question should be asked of every action proposal a Council undertakes.

#### **3. WHAT CAN WE USE TO MAKE IT HAPPEN?**

This question focuses on RESOURCES. Resources are not just money; they include people's time and skills, the use of facilities and equipment, etc. When we plan to do

something it is important to ask whether we have the resources we need to achieve the objectives. We might have some and need to obtain others. It is no use resolving to do something if we do not have the capacity to achieve it. Good intentions by themselves are not effective. This question is also interesting because, like several others which follow, it asks what can WE do? Often we decide something should be done and then decide ‘something else’ should really provide the means for doing it. If we say we want to make something happen we are responsible for our own contribution to making it happen – even if rightly that also involves effort by us to obtain resources from elsewhere.

#### **4. HOW DO WE DO IT?**

This is the issue of STRATEGY. What lines of action are we going to initiate that will lead to our objectives being achieved? This is not just a question of ‘detail’ which can be left to staff of a sub-committee ‘to work out’. The general ‘how’ question should be part of our decision to do anything – because if we cannot think of at least one or two ‘how’s’ then perhaps we should not be deciding that this objective is worth pursuing, at least at this time. (We can of course ask a committee to look at ‘how we do it?’ and report back, but then a final decision on ‘what we want to do’ (Q.2) should wait for the committee’s report. It may be that looking a ‘how’ leads us to change our idea of ‘what’ we want to do). Also this question of ‘how we do it’ should include deciding who, precisely, is to be responsible for answering the ‘detail’ questions 5, 6 and 7 and that they are equipped to find these answers – unless the body deciding how is also going to decide the details itself.

#### **5. EXACTLY HOW DO WE DO IT?**

We now move from strategy into TASK ANALYSIS. Often when we have spent a long time discussing what we want to do and how we are going to do it we feel, and act, as if ‘well that’s achieved’. But of course we have only taken the first steps. Every strategy contains tens and even hundreds of detailed tasks, all of which have to be fitted into our daily schedule. Analyzing these tasks, planning them out, is a tedious business, but what we want to achieve has no chance unless these tasks are both feasible and implemented properly. It is amazing how often we leave ‘the details’ almost to chance, we take for granted they will be carried out, we do not think how even details need to be adjusted so they contribute the maximum possible to achieving our objectives. Yet “tactics are where we live or die” as an old military saying goes.

Question 6. and 7. are directly related to question 5. The answers to these three questions have to be decided interdependently. Each task requires certain skills and knowledge, and takes a certain amount of time. How these questions are answered makes a very real impact on whether a project or activity does ‘live or die’.

#### **6. WHO WILL DO IT?**

In deciding exactly how an objective is going to be achieved we have to establish ASSIGNMENTS – who is going to do the various tasks (Q.5). This requires looking at who has the skills, time and interest needed for each task, and whether there is a proper balance between all the people involved. Both a balance of the skills and experience

needed, and a proper sharing of the workload. If one person is given enough tasks for two people then we destroy either the person or the project (or both!).

## **7. WHEN WILL WE DO IT?**

No plan to achieve anything can be regarded as serious until we set deadlines, and make a proper TIMELINE. We use the timeline not just to set targets for achieving our objective but also to work out the stages or steps needed along the way. Everything we intend to do has to be fitted in to the timeline. If our plans have been based on the assumption that John will do task 'A' which takes two days and then do task 'D' because they both need his skills, but we forget that Sephiwe will need four days for tasks 'B' and 'C' which she has been given, then we are headed for a problem. A timeline can help prevent things like this.

## **8. ARE WE DOING IT?**

This is not as simple or as silly as it sounds. It points to the need for MONITORING of progress as our plans/strategies are implemented. Are the resources we are depending on becoming available? Are tasks getting done on time? Is everyone managing with their assigned tasks for does someone need assistance? At a general level it is often possible to report positively that "the programme is being implemented", but when you look into it more closely you find that although certain things are indeed happening, the programme (the objective) is in a lot of trouble because other important things are not happening. A lot of energetic activity gives the impression of progress but can easily be an illusion. Just because I am busy does not mean I am achieving the objectives I set myself last week. 'Monitoring' is about checking whether the tasks which should be being implemented are being implemented, at the correct time, in the best way, in the right place, etc. Monitoring has to be done systematically, regularly and objectively. If it is done in this way it serves us as a good alarm system if things start to do wrong (so we can correct them), or as an encouragement that things are progressing well.

## **9. HOW DO WE REALLY FEEL ABOUT IT?**

This is our SELF ASSESSMENT of the programme or activity. We have our monitoring data about whether tasks are being achieved and targets met, but what does our experience and our intuition tell us? Is everything positive or are there some worrying concerns that do not show up in the data? Are we experiencing this work as being useful and a contribution to 'why our group exists'? Are we finding it difficult or are we managing quite well. Colleagues need to share their own thoughts and feelings because these are important factors in our work.

## **10. DID WE ACTUALLY DO IT?**

This comes at the end of the programme or work, or it can also come at the end of particular stages or sections of the timeline. It is concerned with EVALUATION of the activity. This may be done internally, or we may be using external evaluations to assist us. What were our objectives, have these been achieved? Important issues here include what 'indicators' we are using that tell us whether our objectives are being met and how we measure them? Did we establish evaluation criteria at the same time as we set our

objectives, or are we making these now? (We need to be careful that our criteria and indicators really measure results and not just tell us what we want to hear).

## **11. SO WHAT?**

After we have evaluated our activity in terms of whether it achieved its objectives we can ask what **CONCLUSIONS** we draw. This goes right back to Q.2 – what were our objectives, were they really appropriate and useful? Now that we have achieved them what has actually changed? In terms of why we are in existence (Q.1) what have we really achieved? Sometimes we can establish a programme, implement it well, meet all our targets and still not be sure that progress has really been achieved? In asking ‘so what’ we need to bring together the results of our monitoring, our self-assessment and our evaluation. Plus we have to ask not only what **WE** think, but what others also think, especially those who were supposed to benefit.

## **12. NOW WHAT?**

Finally we pose the issue of **RECOMMENDATIONS**. Having done it, evaluated it, drawn conclusions – what lessons do we learn that we can use to improve, adjust, and build upon for the future? These may be a direct result of this particular activity, or they may have arisen indirectly from our observation of related issues during this programme. In preparing recommendations we also have to carefully consider how these will be considered and decided upon. How we will begin again to translate them into action? Do they raise questions about ‘why we exist’? And so the questions begin again!

Hopefully this outline shows how a fairly basic framework – a check-list of questions, can be useful in shaping and assisting how a Council goes about its functions. This check-list can be used in a number of ways. Some simple example would include:

- Make a wall-poster of the 12 Questions and hang it in your office and committee meeting room.
- If your Council has an organisational manual, and/or a policy manual, include it in this.
- When preparing policy, programme or project proposals use it as a checklist, either yourself to make sure you have thought about all the issues raised, or even in the written presentation of your proposal showing how your proposal answers each question, or when answers will have to be given later in the implementation.
- Make a wall-chart which lists these questions along one side, and all your current major activities on the other side and keep a check on how each activity is going against the questions.
- Use the check-list to review your overall programme of activities regularly, even perhaps use it to report progress in your Annual Report.