"Whose assessment is this, anyway?"

This story comes from my days as a program officer with a Canadian international development organisation that worked through volunteers, providing accompaniment and training to build staff skills.

Back when my organisation was newly excited about this emerging trend of organisational assessments (OA), we set out to "experiment" by testing an OA survey with one of our long-standing partner organisations in East Africa. This organisation was a small community-based organisation, working in a rural situation with programmes that spread from HIV-AIDS to micro-credit, plus IT training and other vocational training for youth. They were led by a charismatic leader who was very inspiring and dynamic.

My director visited this partner for 2 days and conducted the OA survey with them. Due to the time constraints, there were several 1:1 conversations with long-serving members of the organisation but largely the survey was completed by my director based on her observations. She returned to our office, filled in the survey and assigned the corresponding scores, as directed by this OA tool. Once the results were tallied up, she found that this organisation scored in the "very weak" category and this created serious doubt for her that such a small struggling organisation would be able to "absorb" our capacity building support. Several of the staff had shared with her during the OA that staff were working without consistent salaries, and many were disillusioned and preparing to leave the organisation. Thus, how was our work with them sustainable?

So the partnership was questioned and upcoming activities were cancelled. She instructed me, the program officer responsible for this partnership, to prepare an exit strategy from the partnership. I felt this was an unfair use of the organisational assessment, as we had begun using OA tools as a way to better understanding the strengths and weaknesses of our partner so we could design more appropriate interventions to support them. But instead, we were using this OA as a tool for our own decision-making about partnerships, and in effect, using their weaknesses against them.

I lobbied hard to be able to return to this organisation and spend more time with them, and use other methods of organisational understanding beyond this OA survey. They were understandably wary of this second process, as several important activities had been cancelled after my director's visit. I tried to bring back the spirit of a self-reflective assessment into the process, and also shared examples of my own organisation's strengths and weaknesses, so as to make this more of a mutual exercise of understanding. So we spent time together, conducting interviews with all the staff, holding workshops and coming to a shared understanding of the key issues on the horizon for the organisation. At the end of it, the organisation had developed a shared understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and ended up deciding that they wanted to build linkages with several local capacity building organisations who could offer the specific resources they felt they needed to grow and overcome their challenges. In effect, this signaled a change and an eventual end to our partnership with them, but this was more of a mutual decision than the harsh conclusion reached by my director after the first visit.

Too many of us INGOs neglect to "check our power at the door" when we facilitate organisational assessments. We must work hard to live up to the standards we have set for partnerships and do more than pay lip service to concepts of sovereignty and mutuality.