

Participatory evaluation (I) – sharing lessons from fieldwork in Asia

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Abstract

Background There is a need to study methodologies for evaluating social development projects. Traditional methods of evaluation are often not able to capture or measure the 'spirit of change' in people, which is the very essence of human development. Using participatory methodologies is a positive way to ensure that evaluations encourage an understanding of the value of critical analysis among service providers and other stakeholders. Participatory evaluation provides a systematic process of learning through experiences.

Methods Practical experiences of conducting a number of evaluation studies in social development projects have led the author to develop four basic principles of participatory evaluation strategies. This has been further conceptualized through an extensive literature search. The article develops and shares these principles through descriptions of field experiences in Asia.

Results The article illustrates that the role of any evaluation remains a learning process, one which promotes a climate of reflection and self-assessment. It shows how using participatory methods can create this environment of learning. However, one needs to keep in mind that participatory evaluation takes time, and that the role and calibre of the facilitator are crucial.

Conclusion Participatory evaluation methods have been recommended for social development projects to ensure that stakeholders remain in control of their own lives and decisions.

Keywords

facilitator, field experience, participatory evaluation, stakeholder

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Introduction

This article clarifies the principles of participatory methods for the evaluation of community development projects for disadvantaged groups through examples of field experiences in India, Bangladesh and Nepal. It defines four basic principles of participatory evaluation strategies drawn from practical experiences in the field and further conceptualized through an extensive literature search. It analyses the appropriateness of using participatory methods for evaluating community-based development projects.

In the past two decades there has been a great change in thinking about development programmes for people who have been marginalized, the types of services best suited to fulfil their basic human rights and the role they will play themselves in fulfilling these needs. No longer are programmes accepted as

mere conduits for service delivery, but they are seen as social mobilizers and a channel for empowering people. Concepts of 'participatory development and research' have been born out of such beliefs – the capacity of marginalized populations to assess and solve their own development problems (Garaway 1995; Chambers 1997a; Vlaenderen 2001).

As a natural progression of project implementation, there is the need for evaluations. This has been a prerequisite for most funding agencies in developing countries, and project implementers are increasingly accepting the value of evaluation as an integral part of project development.

The need for participatory evaluation

Just as the ideology of development programmes has become participatory, so evaluation is expected to provide a systematic

process for learning through experiences. It provides a means to look constructively at the strengths and weaknesses in projects, and use the lessons learned to improve planning and implementation measures. It should 'measure the distance travelled' (Dewson *et al.* 2000). It should be a partnership between everyone involved, not be seen as an inspection or a test. It should not turn people into passive objects of knowledge, but rather empower those traditionally 'objectified' to become the 'knowers', and be in control of the decisions being made about their lives (Nelson & Wright 1997). That is, the approach embodies 'formative' evaluation, rather than 'summative' evaluation where externally developed measures are applied and objectivity is the key principle (McConachie 1999).

However, when it comes to actual practice, most non-government organizations (NGOs) and government organizations in the developing world have been hesitant to carry out evaluations. There are very real reasons for this hesitancy. Experience has shown that programme planners and implementers often have a very limited understanding of what evaluation means and are suspicious of it. Negative feelings have developed due to years of filling in survey forms for government departments. There is no value put to this activity as it results in few or no change. Evaluations have been conducted primarily by external 'professional' evaluators, leading to service providers feeling insecure under scrutiny. The smaller the NGO, the greater their sense of insecurity is. They are often anxious that their programmes are being 'checked up' on, and that further funding depends on 'success', resulting in NGOs shying away from acknowledging their problems.

Traditional methods of evaluation are often not able to capture or measure the 'spirit of change' in people, which is the very essence of human development. Using participatory methodologies is a positive way to ensure that evaluations encourage an understanding of the value of critical analysis among service providers and other stakeholders. Vlaenderen (2001, p. 343) stresses that there is a 'dialectical relationship between empowerment and participation'.

Understanding the background

To give further credibility to the point being made in this article, a thorough literature search was carried out. The search identified a number of papers and articles that critically analyse core aspects of participatory research and evaluation methods, i.e. what are the models of this type of research, how is 'participation' described and understood, who are stakeholders, the 'power' game in this type of research and the role of the facilitator.

- **MODELS – definition of models:** Models include stakeholder-based, empowerment evaluation (Mathie & Greene 1997; Schnoes *et al.* 2000), participatory action research, participatory rural appraisal (Chambers 1997b) and realistic evaluation (Pawson & Tilley 1997). This is by no means a comprehensive list, but many of the features, objectives and activities are common among all the models.
- **PARTICIPATION – what participation means:** it involves understanding the importance of dialogue and partnership (Kelly & Vlaenderen 1995), issues around levels, extent and complexities of participation (Chambers 1997a; Naylor *et al.* 2002).
- **STAKEHOLDERS – the understanding of who stakeholders are or should be:** these stress the importance of including stakeholders and the problems of doing so at a practical level (Mathie & Greene 1997; Townsend 1997; Gregory 2000).
- **POWER – the role of power:** these articles examine negative influences and the creation of problems in the participatory process (Maher 1997; Mathie & Greene 1997; Gregory 2000).
- **FACILITATOR – an understanding of the role of the facilitator:** articles highlight how crucial it is, and the need for personal awareness (Garaway 1995; Townsend 1997; Schones *et al.* 2000).

A functional understanding of the principles of participatory evaluation

For the sake of this article, concepts of participation have been distilled into four basic principles of participatory evaluation. The article then looks at how each principle translates into practice.

Participatory evaluation – four main principles:

- 1 Everyone involved in the programme shares control over the process of evaluation.
- 2 The objectives are set in a group and jointly with all the people concerned in the programme, keeping in mind that everyone has his or her own agenda.
- 3 Working out the difficulties faced by everyone helps in strengthening the programme.
- 4 There is a process of collective awareness raising.

1. Everyone involved in the programme shares control over the process of evaluation

Who are the stakeholders and who chooses them? Often those who are most accessible to evaluators are those who have more

power, who have more control, and who are more outspoken, so it could mean that a community in India is represented by the sarpanj (the village head), the Brahmin (the priest), the local political leader accompanied by a few quiet villagers who stay in the background and agree to everything, or the male heads of families who make life-changing decisions without consulting the women in their families.

For participation to take place in its truest sense, evaluation facilitators need to ensure that 'stakeholders' represent all those who are involved and will be affected by the project. Mathie and Greene (1997) go a step further to say that diversity among the stakeholder group also needs to be maintained. To achieve this, it requires an inherent belief within facilitators that beneficiaries of projects (whether they are poor people, the aged, children surviving on the streets, people with disabilities or without literacy, or women in orthodox rural villages or any other such marginalized groups) have the ability to analyse their own lives and make decisions about them (Crishna 1999).

Experience 1: coal mining in India

The issue An international development bank was financing a private-sector company to develop a coal mine in eastern India. A large number of villages had to be relocated. The bank had strict guidelines about stakeholder consultations. As this was also a focus project of an international sustainable development initiative organized by the bank, two other international aid agencies, local government and the company, a very structured monitoring system and strict rules of conduct had been incorporated by the company.

As the Indian consultant, my brief was to give an independent opinion about the status of the consultations that had taken place with the local communities who were going to be affected by the mine. On visiting the villages concerned, I saw that consultation had taken place with the village heads and priests, local politicians and some well-known opinion makers. In some villages, discussions had taken place with a few men's groups. There had been no discussions with the women. The consultation meetings had been, in fact, information-sharing meetings where the people were told about the development of the mine, their relocation, compensation for their lands according to local land laws, how their money would be invested in the local bank, the development of a Trust Fund and the possibility of training in micro-credit schemes and small-scale industry initiatives. This information was shared by the few who had attended the meetings.

It was not surprising then that the rest of the villagers were unhappy and hostile, confused and dejected.

The strategy used

- 1 A series of face-to-face meetings was arranged with the company representatives in the field, local village representatives chosen by the villagers themselves, and the international bank, with the objective of setting up a transparent process of consultation, encouraging actual dialogue, and sharing concerns and ideas on an equal platform. A timetable for continued ongoing meetings was set up. In many cases, women's meetings were held separately.
- 2 A livelihood assessment, with the help of local development NGOs and villagers, with the aim of putting together a choice of alternative income generation activities which the communities felt would be appropriate for them.
- 3 Short on going training sessions on understanding how the compensation of getting money for land would work for them, the complexities of using banks as a way of saving their income, how the Trust Fund would work and other such need-based issues.

Results When the work on the mine finally started, there was active co-operation from the villagers. The majority of the villagers saw this as a process of improved development, a change from the old to the new.

2. The objectives are set in a group and jointly with all the people concerned in the programme, keeping in mind that every one has his or her own agenda

The objectives are set in a group and have to meet the needs of all the players: those who are providing the funding, those who are receiving the funding and are directly responsible for the running of the programme, and the 'beneficiaries' of the programme.

Experience 2: a baseline study in Bangladesh

The issue An international aid agency commissioned a study to be conducted to understand the status of disabled people and general development in 10 different geographical districts in Bangladesh with the aim of implementing services. The study was being co-ordinated by their main partners in Dhaka, a large training agency for disability, which they funded. This agency carried out disability training for community workers from rural and urban community development organizations throughout Bangladesh and did not work directly in the field themselves. These smaller organizations were their partners. The funders and the Dhaka agency felt that this study should be carried out using participatory methods.

Everyone had his or her own objectives and agendas as to why they were participating in the study:

- The funders wanted to initiate a longer research programme to evaluate their concept of disability service delivery, and this study was being seen as a baseline. They wanted all the information compiled into one general report.
- The Dhaka agency were keen to assess the quality of their training.
- The partner organizations were keen to participate in a national-level research project as this added status to their work. They wanted the final report to carry their independent ideas in the form of individual reports.
- The members from the communities felt by participating in this research, they would acquire skills that would be of future use to them.
- The disabled people wanted services for their rehabilitation.

The strategy used Initial planning meetings and an objective-setting workshop were held with the funding agency, the Dhaka agency, and their partners and members from the community. Everyone was encouraged to share his or her ideas, and consensus was obtained. The objectives were then listed, and participants realized that the final list actually met the needs of everyone, thus allowing the study to be initiated on a positive note.

Results

- 1 In the process of sharing these ideas, a better understanding of the need for the study developed, and there was a feeling of 'oneness'.
- 2 The study was completed within the stipulated time frame in spite of heavy rains, previous workload and other such practical issues.

3. Working out the difficulties faced by everyone helps in strengthening the programme

All the stakeholders need to be able to visualize the change. If people are incapable of seeing the developmental process going on, or how the lessons being learned are encouraging change, it remains the role of the facilitator to create an environment of sharing and learning for this realization to take place.

Experience 3: community-based rehabilitation (CBR) in Nepal

The issue An international agency funds a local NGO in one of the districts of Nepal to run a CBR programme for people

with disabilities. The CBR programme had been running for 5 years before it was able to get international support. The programme is an impressive one as it has grown slowly and has been defined by the needs of the community, is run by members from the community, and works in tandem with general development programmes. It uses local resources and builds on existing strengths within its community. I first visited it when I was asked to conduct a skill-training workshop for their CBR workers. I was deeply impressed by how well the organization had understood the concepts and philosophy of CBR and seemed to have internalized it into their lives.

Three years later I was asked by the NGO to come and conduct a mid-term review of the CBR project, as the funders needed this information to decide on further funding and continued assistance. The NGO had managed to convince the funder that they would like to choose their own evaluator.

During my initial meetings, I was startled by the animosity and lack of trust that the NGO showed in having to comply with this request. I learned that they had undergone a review 1 year after they had received funding and had been deeply disillusioned with the methods that had been used and the conclusions drawn by the evaluators. The evaluators had been two foreign specialists in disability, who had taken 10 days to conduct the evaluation. They had used questionnaires to gather data and had carried out the entire exercise without any consultations with the NGO themselves. One month after this evaluation was completed, the NGO was asked to a meeting and was given the results of the evaluation. The results were negative and critical, and had left the NGO feeling insecure and angry. As a result of the evaluation, the funders put in many more 'systems for monitoring' into the programme, resulting in more paperwork and less time for programme work.

The strategy used

- 1 Initial trust-building meetings were held with the NGO and funder, separately and together, including a short training workshop on understanding participatory methods.
- 2 Objectives for the evaluation were set together, paying attention to understanding the parameters and boundaries and the need for meeting individual agenda.
- 3 An 'evaluation team' was chosen, which comprised members from the funder, the NGO management, the CBR workers, the clients and the local community.
- 4 A decision was made to work at two levels:
 - to train all concerned to understand the philosophy of participatory evaluation, how it is conducted, what tools can be used, how data are gathered, identifying stakehold-

ers, analysing results, drawing conclusions about strengths and constraints, making recommendations, and drafting the final report, in other words, how 'participatory research' works;

- to facilitate the actual evaluation of the CBR programme using all that they were learning.

At the end, 1 day was spent in analysing the 3-month-long process and the participatory methodology used.

Results

- 1 There was an almost tangible change in attitude. The NGO felt ensured that they were on the right track. They understood the need to carry out ongoing monitoring and look critically at their work, and the funder understood the strengths of the programme, felt confident and worked out appropriate systems of ongoing monitoring in consultation with the NGO.
- 2 All the team members felt that they were important players in the process of making a difference in the lives of disabled people. They felt that the programme belonged to them, and that they had a stake in ensuring its growth and development.

4. There is a process of collective awareness raising

People learn to solve problems together and thus develop their own capacity to be critical. As information is shared with the group and everyone shares control over the process of evaluation, it becomes an empowering experience. If an atmosphere of trust and transparency has developed from the very outset, skills of 'critical analysis' can be understood by all the stakeholders.

Experience 4: domestic child labour in Kolkata

The issue An NGO running a programme to support domestic child labour in Kolkata in India receives funds from an international aid agency. They work in partnership. An end-of-project review needed to be carried out to decide further funding. It was decided to follow a participatory methodology, where there would be representation from all stakeholders, the funders, the NGO, the children who were working as domestic labour and the employers of these children. (Note: using children for any kind of labour is illegal in India, so those who employ children know they are breaking the law.) The funders were excited about the method, but sceptical about getting employers to acknowledge that they employed children,

and that children would be able to judge progress in the programme.

The strategy used

- 1 Initially individual meetings were held with employers. Once they were convinced that they would not be sent to the police (i.e. they developed trust), and that their co-operation would add value to the programme, it was possible to identify a core group who agreed to give time and be part of the longer process of the evaluation and actively participate including data collection.
- 2 Small group meetings were held with children to get an understanding of their perceptions.
- 3 Training sessions were held for participants on understanding the concepts of 'evaluation', its need and how it would be conducted, skills in collecting data and analysing what was found. Sessions had to be conducted separately for children and adults, and continued to be carried out throughout the study. This flexibility was necessary as the participants were from divergent groups and issues being addressed were sensitive ones.
- 4 The findings and report were shared with all the stakeholders in a combined workshop.

Results

- 1 The setting up of a system of regular 'awareness' meetings with employers. Those who had participated in the study took the responsibility of bringing new members.
- 2 Those children who took part in the study were able to look at what they had, what needed to be done and to plan a future. Many of them brought other working children to the NGO to join the programme.
- 3 The funding agency decided to use this method of evaluation in all the programmes with which they were involved in eastern India as they felt that it had given them a depth of understanding about their programmes, which they had not envisaged before.

The role of the facilitator

The role of the facilitator is crucial. Garaway (1995) states that the external evaluator becomes a facilitator, a teacher and a learner, and creates an environment for shared interactive learning. In fact, the facilitator remains the main 'tool' in conducting the evaluation. He or she may use all the strategies and tools of qualitative/participatory research, but finally it is

the attitude and values projected that transforms the evaluation from just another exercise in finding out whether the project works or not, to an empowering experience for all concerned. The attitude has to be one of understanding and reflection, having the capacity of look within and continuously challenging one's own professional ideologies and understanding of social truths, of development processes, of how the 'poorest of the poor' think and understand their own lives, of moving away from clichés and generalities about marginalized people and listening to what *is*. This remains the most crucial part of the process, and one that 'makes' or 'breaks' its value.

Challenges of the participatory process

Do participatory methods of evaluation of development programmes fill all the gaps that more traditional methods seem to throw up? They certainly do not. While appreciating the benefits of using a participatory method, it is essential to keep in mind the challenges to be faced:

- Such evaluations are able to follow a logical sequence, but it is difficult in advance to define and maintain a set structure.
- Evaluations of this nature require time. Planning for such processes needs to give time for learning, sharing, transfer of skills, and understanding perspectives.
- The role of the facilitator is crucial. If the facilitator does not have an attitude of learning and sharing, and an ability to be sensitive to local customs and beliefs, he or she can be a deterrent to the process of empowerment.
- The evaluation methods and structures have to be flexible and have the ability to be changed and adapted constantly, thus making it difficult to contain information within set parameters.
- Stakeholder perceptions are varied, often leading to confusion during the process.
- It is a complex process requiring a great deal of imagination and skill on the part of the facilitator, to manage the technical aspects of research, such as ensuring reliability and validity, and highlighting or minimizing bias, in a way that it will be understood by all the players in the evaluation and without the study losing some of its basic essence.

Conclusion

Experiences of work have been drawn from different countries and in varied fields of community developmental work. The article thus illustrates that no matter which country or

which aspect of development, the role of any evaluation remains a learning process, one that promotes a climate of reflection and self-assessment. The role of the facilitator is crucial at every stage of the process. In the four examples given to illustrate the four principles of participatory evaluation, the facilitator has had a different role in each: he or she has been a broker with the power to involve all the stakeholders, an artist who helps create a vision, a mediator who facilitates understanding, and a counsellor who helps build self-esteem and worth.

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