

Maximising participation in international community-level project evaluation: a strength-based approach

The evaluation of international aid-funded development projects implemented primarily by NGOs usually relies heavily on input from community members. However, the evaluation design and conduct generally does not provide the time, or the opportunity, for the participation of all community members. Informants are often selected according to a statistical sampling method or they are the 'leaders' of the community or groups within the community.

In addition, methods used for data collection, such as questionnaires and surveys, can be intimidating to people who are illiterate or who have limited literacy skills, thus alienating large numbers of potential community stakeholders further. The community can be alienated from the evaluation process even more when the data collected from the community, or its representatives, at each evaluation site, is taken away for collation and analysis and is rarely seen again by those who provided it.

This article demonstrates that the situation outlined above need not be the case and that evaluations can be both inclusive and informing for all stakeholders, including donors/commissioners, implementing agencies and the community. The article also contends that this approach to project evaluation, as well as being inclusive and transparent, is also empowering to communities and enhances the sustainability of project outcomes.

Introduction

The demand for the conduct of evaluations of international aid community development projects has been common among donors for some time. Evaluations are also rapidly becoming recognised by implementing agencies as an integral and valuable component of projects (Leeuw 2009; World Bank 2006). While the value of evaluation to donors and implementing agencies has been recognised by such organisations, there is still a lack of recognition of the need for evaluations to demonstrate direct benefits for the people/communities that are the target(s) of the project or intervention, and the source(s) of information for the evaluation. Whether the evaluation is quantitative or qualitative in approach, the people/community ought to gain a direct benefit from the evaluation and should have ownership of the knowledge they have contributed. This article suggests that end-of-project evaluations can have significant benefits for all parties involved in the project and the evaluation, including donors, the implementing agency and the community.

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Real or assumed benefits

To illustrate the above, this article draws on a case of an actual evaluation that used a strength-based approach with Appreciative Inquiry (New Paradigm Consulting 2008) as the guiding methodology. Within this, a number of user-friendly tools were employed to: enhance participation; allow triangulation of data; and to provide a degree of quantification for an otherwise qualitative evaluation.

The conduct of this case study evaluation was therefore informed mainly by the constructionist paradigm in that the people who were the main stakeholders of the project provided the information about the project's benefits from their perspective. This contrasts with the positivist paradigm where the evaluation would merely determine whether the project's stated aims were fulfilled or not (Guba & Lincoln 1989). When benefits are recognised and grounded in the local people's knowledge, they are more likely to be of lasting value because they are identified by those who are the owners of the benefits and the knowledge derived from the project. In addition, project outcomes are more likely to be sustained when they are seen to be local and belonging to the community in which the activity has occurred, rather than belonging to the project and/or the project donors and implementers (Guba & Lincoln 1989; Trudgen 2000). Thus, a successful end result is when there is real benefit and useful knowledge for all of the following: the donor; the implementing agency; *and the people who are the target of the project.*

More on the differences between constructionist and positivist approaches

There is a clear distinction between the objectives of the respective proponents of the constructionist and the positivist approach to evaluation and indeed of social research. Proponents of a rigid approach to evaluation and knowledge acquisition that searches for 'objective truth' to justify positivist assumptions tend to rely on replicable approaches such as randomised control trials, standardised surveys of statistically dissected communities, counterfactuals¹ and quasi-experimental designs (Labonte, Feather & Hills 1999). While the cost of these methods in evaluations are often beyond the financial resources of most implementing agencies, aspects of these approaches, such as counterfactuals, are almost impossible to measure (CGD 2006).

Such methods are also beyond the comprehension of community members living in developing countries, many of whom are illiterate, have limited literacy skills and have little experience beyond their local environment. While statistically representative cohorts of people may provide a snapshot of a community that can be useful to donors and even to governments, the knowledge gained using such methods is rarely returned in the form of a report or other findings, to those who gave the information in

the first place. Furthermore, it is generally perceived to have come from certain individuals rather than from the community to which it supposedly refers.

Donor versus community interests

There is also what Nagao (2006) refers to as an asymmetry of interest between what a donor might require from an evaluation and how it ought to be conducted, and the respective requirements of program recipients. Indeed, there is a risk that the interests of the donor prevail over those of the recipients because the former is the provider of funds. It is also often a consultant from the donor's country of origin who conducts the evaluation, and, consequently, the values and culture of the consultant may be the same as those of the donor. A further risk is that the future contracting interests of the consultant in relation to the donor may then impact on the conduct and outcome of the evaluation.

In the constructionist approach to evaluation, it is the 'particular experience' that is the important source of knowledge and this particular experience may not align with the expectations (positivist assumptions) of the project designers and donors. However, it is the impact on the person/community as perceived by them that can lead to the lasting impact and knowledge that informs the person/community in the future. An important outcome of evaluations of community development projects therefore, must be ownership of the knowledge generated by those who provide it. For the local people/community, this local knowledge is more relevant and important for dealing with local issues than external knowledge, especially accumulated, research-based, 'foreign' knowledge (Owen with Rogers 1999). In the words of Freire and Macedo, as cited in Labonte, Feather and Hills (1999, p. 3):

... the first act of power people can take in managing their own lives is 'speaking the world', naming their experiences in their own words under conditions where their stories are listened to and respected by others.

Ways to overcome limitations

A reality for many NGOs implementing time-bound projects with limited budgets is that there is very often no funding allocated for the dissemination of the information gained during an evaluation. Once evaluators leave, community members rarely see the result of their contribution to the evaluation. However, the case study evaluation presented in this article, intentionally utilised tools that encouraged participation and allowed for the collation of relevant data to be completed at the evaluation site. All those who had contributed to the evaluation, either by their presence at the event and/or their direct participation in data-gathering activities, knew the qualitative and quantitative local results, before the evaluation team left the village/evaluation site.

Furthermore, while the data from all evaluation sites and other sources may require an overall analysis to gauge the full impact of the project across multiple sites and the outcomes for both donor and implementing agency, the raw data that is relevant to the local people/community is available immediately. For example, results of the various activities conducted within the case study were publicly announced as the last activity of the evaluation at each site. This approach is also culturally appropriate for the local people because oral, public consensus is the traditional method of knowledge transfer and decision-making.

The matter of adding value through an evaluation

The notion that evaluations should 'add value' is a much-debated issue. Leeuw argues that evaluation should add value to a knowledge/theory base about the process of evaluations themselves (Leeuw 2009). Evaluations can also be used to identify if the program/project has added value to the field in which the program/project is involved (Hind 2009; Georghiou 2002). That evaluations should add value to management systems and policies is also a long-held view (Leeuw 2009). This article goes on to show that an end-of-project evaluation can add value at three levels: the community, the donor and the implementer. The value added by the evaluation at any level will depend on the use made of the information at that level. The main focus here though, is the value that evaluation can add at the community level, where the most important outcomes should be:

- people at the community level are able to participate freely in the evaluation
- ownership of the information produced by, and provided for, the evaluation should remain with the people/community.

The case

A strength-based approach

The case highlighted here, used a strength-based approach. This was used because regardless of what the project/program did or did not achieve, it was important that people drew some positive outcomes from their experiences.² With this in mind, the starting point of the evaluation fieldwork involved finding out what had been the positive project outcomes for all involved (donor, evaluators and communities), intended or otherwise.

A strength-based approach to community development focuses on the positive aspects of people's lives. It looks to identify people's strengths, which may be assets, skills or values, and then determines how people can use these strengths to bring about desired outcomes. This contrasts with the more commonly used needs-based approach, which focuses on the negative aspects of people's lives, such as the problems or weaknesses; for

example, disease, lack of services or lack of resources.

Using a strength-based approach, however, does not mean that people's needs are ignored. On the contrary, this approach emphasises how their strengths can be used to improve their situation by presenting issues in a positive manner. For example, in trying to address the issue of infant mortality (that is, the number of children who die before they reach the age of five), the issue would be addressed by determining how to improve the survival rate of infants as distinct from how to reduce the infant mortality rate. The intended outcome is the same in both cases, but the language, and usually the enthusiasm with which people embrace a positively framed activity, is likely to be more effective and lasting.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is one such strength-based approach used to gather information from people in relation to their strengths and how these might be used to achieve their aspirations.

AI is often associated with the review of organisations and their structural components, such as management and operational departments. In these situations, it is seen as an approach to organisational analysis and learning. For example, it is:

- intended for discovering, understanding and fostering innovations in social organizational arrangements and processes
- a form of transformational inquiry that selectively seeks to locate, highlight and illuminate the 'lifegiving' forces of an organisation's existence
- based on the belief that human systems are made and imagined by those who live and work within them
- seeks out the 'best of what is' to help ignite the collective imagination of 'what might be' (MacCoy 2006).

While the literature regarding the use of AI in evaluation is mostly focused on organisations and systems in the Western, developed world, AI can also be successfully used as a methodology for conducting community-level, project evaluations in developing country situations.

Coghlan, Preskill & Catsambas (2003) summarise the value of using AI in evaluation as:

- an overarching approach that guides the entire evaluation
- a way to develop a program's logic model
- a method to use with stakeholders to focus an evaluation
- a means for designing effective surveys and interview protocols

- an approach to developing an evaluation system within an organisation.

When AI is used for evaluation a number of assumptions are made in relation to humans. Hammond (1998, pp. 20–21) succinctly outlines eight main assumptions of AI. These are:

- 1 In every society, organization, or group, something works.
- 2 What we focus on becomes our reality.
- 3 Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities.
- 4 The act of asking questions of an organization or a group influences the group in some way.
- 5 People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known).
- 6 If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past.
- 7 It is important to value differences.
- 8 The language we use creates our reality.

Hammond's list is very much the basis of the strength-based approach outlined above.

AI uses a four-stage process to facilitate a dialogue between the inquirer and the subject of the inquiry. These stages are known as the four Ds (4D): Discover, Dream, Design and Destiny. For the purpose of this example and article 'Destiny' is replaced with 'Do'.³

Details of the case

This case study comprised an end-of-project evaluation of a three-year program that targeted rural villages on an island in a Melanesian state. The project had two objectives. The first of these was to improve nutrition through improved food security. The second was to increase income levels. The data collection tools used were user-friendly so that whether literate or illiterate, confident or shy, each person had an opportunity to convey their own point of view. The key tools employed were:

- focus group discussion/dialogue using the 4Ds
- Pocket Charts to allow individuals to express an anonymous view (see below)
- the 'Ten Seed Technique' to obtain a communal view in relation to specific issues (see below).

Focus groups

To establish a dialogue with each community, focus groups were held. In this case, the facilitator used indicative questioning that can vary slightly depending on the group, the language and/or the context. Focus groups of all stakeholders were engaged in a dialogue about the project using the 4D approach. Questions covered:

- *Discover*: What did you gain as a result of this project?
- *Dream*: What would you like to achieve for yourself/family/community in the near future?
- *Design*: How will what you have gained from this project help you to achieve your (dream)?
- *Do (Destiny/Deliver)*: What are you doing now/ what is the first thing you will do to achieve your (dream)?

Thus, at the community level the discussion was conducted in groups that were appropriate for the community and for the topic under discussion. These groups could be based on sex, age or relative status of participants, or they might be mixed groups. Precise numbers in groups were not specified. However, very large groups were split for convenience and to improve the chance for participation. While this process may not have resulted in every person having a say, it did allow every person present to be aware of everything that was said.

Other stakeholders for a focus group could include project staff, donor representatives who had visited the project, staff from government authorities and ministries, business people or interested observers. The questions for such participants could change slightly; for example, Discover: *What benefits to the community/project participants/others have you observed as a result of this project?*

Eventually, focus groups at the evaluation sites consisted of adult women, adult men, female youth and male youth.⁴ Other groups included Provincial Ministry of Agriculture staff, Provincial Ministry of Health staff and individuals such as business people and provincial politicians.

Pocket Chart

The Pocket Chart is a simple data collection tool that allows people to express a view—anonously if they choose to do so. It involves a person placing a voting token into a pocket on which an issue or subject they wish to vote for or support is depicted. Issues or subjects were depicted in a way that could be understood by all and was most often pictorial. Women and men used different voting tokens to allow for the disaggregation of data. (Such disaggregation can also be achieved by age groups or other interest or minority groups.) The Pocket Chart also provided a degree of quantification to issues that lent themselves more to qualitative data collection methods. The Pocket Chart allows this without intrusive questioning.

In this type of evaluation a Pocket Chart can be used to gather data in relation to specific outcomes from the project design and general attitude in relation to the implementation of the project. The Pocket Chart also allows people who may not be confident enough to speak out in a focus group or who are illiterate, to express an opinion anonymously.

The Pocket Chart can be used more than once at sites during fieldwork. In this case study, evaluation

Pocket Charts were used three times and comprised the first and last data collection activity at each site. In the first activity, people indicated their situation in relation to indicators of how they felt in relation to the project generally. This was carried out by the use of 'happy, indifferent and angry' face depictions. These votes were counted immediately for all those present to see the result. Pictures depicting happy, indifferent and sad/angry faces were placed on three pockets and people could express their opinion about what they thought of the project overall and the way in which it had been implemented. The data collected was disaggregated for sex and age and provided the implementing agency with feedback on their performance.

The chart was then used once more. This time it was used to gain data against indicators for which baseline information had been collected at the beginning of the project in order to gain an indication about whether incomes had increased or not. Indicators of income included: clothing, footwear, school fees, earned income, iron roof, water tank and household items such as cooking pots. If people indicated that they now had a greater number of items than before, then this would indicate that incomes had increased. A picture indicating shoes on a man, a woman, a girl and a boy would indicate that all family members had footwear.

In the last data collection activity, people voted against indicators of nutritional status for which baseline information also existed. Such indicators could include: regularity of eating protein by all family members; main source of food, for example store-bought or traditional garden; and all family members always have enough to eat.

These depictions were correlated with the indicators used in collecting baseline data in relation to diet, nutrition levels and income levels. While the respondents were not necessarily the same for the baseline (where households were selected) and the final evaluation, the resulting data provided a more complete picture of community status in relation to the project's objectives.

The last activity at each evaluation site was to count all the tokens in the pocket charts publicly and the data was then openly displayed and so became available to all those present.

Ten Seed Technique

The Ten Seed Technique (TST) is a participatory tool that can be used for rapid assessments related to the current status of the community in relation to an issue (Jayakaran 2000). The TST uses 10 seeds (or similar) to represent an entire (relevant) population of the village/community where the activity is taking place. The seeds are placed on a contrasting background of a depiction of the issue being discussed. The group (focus group size or larger mixed groups) of people involved move the seeds to represent the proportion of the population depicted (or otherwise) by the picture/question. For example, in response to a question such as: *What*

proportion of families in this village have school age children who do not attend school?, if three seeds are placed over a picture indicating a child not in school, this would mean that 30 per cent of families have school-age children who do not attend school. This question can then be followed up with another such as: *How many of these children are not in school because the family cannot pay the required fees and charges?* In this way various levels of an issue can be investigated. For example, a further question could be: *Of the families who cannot afford fees and charges for all their children, how many families have chosen to send boys to school while keeping girls at home?*

The TST enables all people to be involved because it asks for a response from the group about the total population/community. It provides a safe environment, as it does not identify the individual. There is often a great deal of discussion among participants during the TST, and the discussion and movement of seeds ends when a consensus is reached regarding the number and placement of the seeds.

In the case study, the TST was conducted as part of the focus group exercise. The questions asked in the TST exercise were questions that related to the project's baseline information so that comparisons could be made. Questions related to: families who did not have enough to eat all year round; families with school age children not attending school (the sex of these children and the reasons for non-attendance); and any discrimination between men and women, boys and girls in relation to resources (food, clothes, school fees allocation).

Results from the TST activity were also relayed to the gathered public at each evaluation site prior to the counting of the Pocket Chart results.

Discussion

At the community level, AI is best used as an overarching approach to guide the evaluation, as indicated by Coghlan, Preskill & Catsambas (2003). Thus, the evaluation retains consistency between evaluation sites, without being locked into a format that does not have the flexibility to cater for the varying needs of the people or prevents their participation. For instance, the use of indicative questions rather than a set of prescribed questions is an example of this flexibility.

In addition, the language used in the evaluation is key to engaging stakeholders in the evaluation. If the language is positive, people are more likely to want to be involved. Also, when the language is familiar, understanding of the process and its purpose by the people/community is more likely.

Through facilitation of a dialogic process initiated by the indicative questions, those involved in the various focus groups can contribute to, and gain from, the discussion. Group members hear the views of others, whether or not they contribute directly themselves. Because the dialogue is predominantly positive, the stimulus to contribute to the discussion is usually greater than when the tone is more about what can be done 'for us' rather

than what can be done 'by us'. Such discussion also: reminds people of the reasons they engaged with the project; highlights what they gained from the project; and, if they have not already done so, stimulates them to consider what they will do with what they have gained to improve their family's or their community's future. Therefore, the process helps to place ownership and responsibility for a community's wellbeing on the people themselves.

Another outcome is that when the focus of the discussion focuses on the gains/benefits (outcomes) obtained from the project, this process helps to ensure sustainability of the project outcomes. The end of a project can often be perceived to be the end of a discrete event within developing communities. However, AI-guided, participatory evaluation can be the bridge that links the intervention of the project to the future lives of the people by clearly linking outcomes with the future rather than to a discrete event in the past. This process is the core of the strength-based approach: identifying the good, the strengths and the valued aspects that exist within people/communities and carrying them forward to build the future.

In this particular evaluation case study, community-level discussion highlighted the need for communities to return to their more traditional food staples and to be less reliant on processed foods purchased in stores. The discussion also highlighted the relatively healthy lifestyles of the past and contrasted them with the current increased incidence of lifestyle-induced disease and shorter life spans that people now want to see improved. Many aspects of the project were seen to provide the means to capture the aspects of the relatively healthy recent past, while at the same time allowing people to increase their participation in market and income-earning opportunities.

Other stakeholders, such as members of government, staff of government Ministries and authorities, business people and members of community-based organisations and churches, can also be involved in the evaluation using AI as the methodology. The positive focus of the evaluation can lead to an increase in the morale of government and staff, which often suffers due to lack of resources to implement what are sometimes basic, core functions—a common issue for staff in the areas of health, education and agricultural services in developing countries.

In the case study, this benefit was demonstrated by Ministry of Agriculture staff during their focus group responses. Staff commented on how the project had provided them with the opportunity to 'do their job' and to regain some respect within communities. They felt that they had regained a relationship with rural people that they formerly had as agricultural extension officers.

The use of the Pocket Chart and the TST was advantageous as these can give a degree of quantification to what is primarily a qualitative methodology. Data collected using such tools allows comparisons to be made with similar data collected,

either prior to the commencement of a project or during a project's early stages.

The associated data collected from communities (where often large proportions of the population are illiterate or have limited literacy skills and public participation and engagement is usually dominated by a powerful minority) are likely to be more reliable than data collected using more conventional techniques such as surveys—which can be intimidating for many. It is also difficult to ensure that follow-up surveys are undertaken with the same people or indeed the same household.⁵

Also, in many communities it is women who are not able to participate fully, and it is the men who dominate. It is true that in some instances, women are able to express a view publicly and it is also true that not all men are dominant, but as a general rule the gendered nature of community life in developing societies means that women often go unheard.

An important aspect of using the Pocket Chart is that all votes from both men and women are counted publicly. This allows all present to know how their community sees itself from the varying perspectives of individuals and groupings. The disaggregated nature of the voting is highlighted when counting the tokens. The number and mix of tokens in pockets may indicate different knowledge in relation to some issues between men, women and youth. (It has to be admitted though, that such differences may still indicate the gendered roles of men and women within society.)

Meanwhile, the TST provides the opportunity for people to be involved in expressing a view in relation to a population (village, minority group, group based on age, sex or some other category) and an issue relevant to that population. By indicating their view, directly or indirectly through an intermediary, in relation to the issue under discussion, a person can have input into a collective response that does not identify individuals and refers only to the total of the relevant population. So, an individual may not necessarily be a member of the relevant population or group to which the exercise relates, but is still able to contribute.

The TST stimulates participation and discussion by people of all abilities because it uses visual stimuli provided by objects (such as seeds or stones or shells), which are tangible (Jayakaran 2002). Engagement with community groups using the TST can be animated, informative and often continue for some time. Consequently, it is important that evaluation site facilitators do not constrain these activities by placing tight time limits on them.

The TST also appears to be a culturally appropriate tool for use in many developing communities because it requires a communal consensus in order to conclude the activity, and consensus is a very common decision-making process in developing communities.

TST results from the various groups involved in the TST activity were also made public to all present. Some differences between consensus responses from different groups were also discussed

by the whole group at this point. For example, differences in responses to an issue about who eats protein on a daily basis among men and young men's groups, compared with those given by female groups, reflected the gendered nature of the community and where power and influence sat, as much as it told about the diet of the different groups.

The data collected via the use of the Pocket Chart and the TST, while providing communities (including relevant government bodies) with a picture of itself perhaps not previously seen, also provided valuable information for both donors and implementing organisations. For the donor, interest in the data related more specifically to the issues targeted in the project design and, as such, enabled the donor to determine whether the funds provided have been effective in achieving intended outcomes.

Such information also enabled donors to make informed decisions in relation to strategies and policies as they related to particular issues, sectors and country strategies. If donors can see that their funds are being used effectively by achieving outcomes, and by ensuring that people benefit from project funds in a way that is appropriate and positive (whether intended or not), then decisions about future funding can be based on informed, grassroots information.

Implementing organisations can also benefit from the data obtained from Pocket Chart and TST activities. The data gained provides information to compare with previously obtained data and also creates a basis from which to make decisions in relation to future interventions, either within the same communities or similar communities in similar circumstances.

The most important aspect of combining the Pocket Chart and the TST with AI methodology is that every individual is given the opportunity to express their views without incurring embarrassment, shame or retribution.

Conclusion

When combined for an overall analysis, data collected by using a combination of focus group discussion, Pocket Chart and the TST, enables triangulation, which enhances reliability. There are instances of course where seemingly contradictory data will emerge from the different tools in relation to the same issue/topic. This is common to most forms of data collection in evaluations and decisions related to how to account for these discrepancies are made, as they would be for any contradictory data gained using more traditional tools. However, such discrepancies may alert stakeholders to issues related to gender, service delivery and access, of which they may have been previously unaware.

The difference from traditional evaluation processes that this strength-based process offers is in relation to the benefits it provides for communities in which NGOs work. These comprise:

- *Ownership of the information provided in the evaluation.* There is participation as well as public knowledge about the results. This is in contrast to the often closed and private nature of surveys where participating communities rarely get to know the complete outcome of the data collection activity. As a result, community members have indicated to the case evaluators their great appreciation about knowing the outcome.
- *A new awareness of the community in which they live.* Many community members (and community leaders in particular) have expressed their surprise at the knowledge gained during such events. The surprise has been that they have discovered many aspects and issues within their communities, of which they were previously unaware.
- *The sustainability of project outcomes is given greater impetus.* By raising awareness of the benefits of project outcomes, some of which may not have been obvious to some community members, sustainability is given greater impetus. By hearing from others, and by being reassured from the discovery that one's view is often a shared view, people are more likely to continue to develop their plans that they have articulated or formed during the evaluation.

In conclusion, small-scale development projects provide one of the most effective ways of allowing grassroots participation. It is important that this participation extends to the final evaluation of projects in which the people have been involved and, at best, have been real partners.

At the grassroots level, participation needs to mean more than just groups or communities being 'statistically representative'—the process needs to be open to all. By using truly participatory tools, such as the Pocket Chart and Ten Seed Technique combined with well-facilitated discussions under the auspices of Appreciative Inquiry, community-level project evaluations can be successful events for all stakeholders, i.e. the implementing organisation, the donor and, most critically, the communities (including government) that were meant to benefit.

Notes

- 1 A counterfactual describes what (it is assumed) would have happened if the project/program had not happened.
- 2 The alternative is that in the case of a perceived 'failed' project, a focus on the failure may exacerbate the state of poverty or whatever it was that triggered the intervention in the first place.
- 3 'Do' is used instead of 'Destiny' as it is a more practical word and more easily understood in the communities involved.
- 4 In Melanesia, the term 'youth' applies to males and females who have reached sexual maturity but remain unmarried. This generally applies to young men and women between the ages of 15–30 years. While

marriage generally occurs before age 30, a person over this age who remains unmarried would then be considered to be no longer a youth.

- 5 In developing communities, the Western, unitary household of the nuclear family rarely exists.

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