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NGOS AND IMPACT ASSESSMENT

1. Introduction

The role and approach of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in development has changed radically over the last fifteen to twenty years. NGOs are now accepted as significant contributors to the development process by governments and official agencies. In the early 1980s it was assumed that NGOs would have an impact because of who they were and their relationship and closeness to the 'beneficiaries'. This unsubstantiated assumption has increasingly come into question; throughout the 1990s the issue of **assessing NGO impact** and the need for **appropriate methodologies** to do so came to the fore. As the profile of NGOs has increased, so too has the need for them to assess the impact of their work. The rise in popularity of NGOs and the increase in funding channelled through them by governments has had consequences in terms of performance and accountability (Edwards and Hulme 1995). In addition, NGOs have become more critically aware themselves of the need to assess their impact, both for organisational learning and strategy development and in order to inform an increasingly discerning public supporter base. This Policy Briefing Paper explores the current state of the **debate** on impact assessment of development interventions. It moves on to review the current state of practice and methodologies and concludes with a summary of critical issues and **implications** for NGOs.

Definitions of Impact

There are a number of different definitions of **impact**. For example, impact is 'improvements in the lives and livelihoods of beneficiaries' (OECD/DAC, 1997). The following definition by Blankenberg (1995) is particularly helpful because it is related to the key concepts surrounding impact **assessment**:

'Impact concerns **long-term** and **sustainable changes** introduced by a given intervention in the lives of beneficiaries. Impact can be related either to the specific objectives of an intervention or to unanticipated changes caused by an intervention; such unanticipated changes may also occur in the lives of people not belonging to the beneficiary group. Impact can be either positive or negative, the latter being equally important to be aware of.' (Blankenberg, 1995.)

The key concepts in Blankenberg's definition are:

- Impact assessment is about **sustainable change**. This is change that comes about as a result of project or programme activities.
- These changes can even be **unanticipated**. A project or programme has objectives which it is hoped will be achieved through the planned activities. It may be that through links with other projects or the **catalytic** effect of the project or programme additional changes to the ones proposed have come about.
- It essential to remember that **change can be negative**. Negative change can be attributable to an intervention or be due to wider circumstances beyond the control of those managing a project or programme.

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Definitions of Impact Assessment

'Impact assessment' describes an assessment of the longer term and sustainable changes that are planned to occur from development interventions. The term is relatively new to the development community but has been in use in environmental impact and social impact assessment for many years. Impact assessment has often been confused with the **evaluation** of a project's or programme's **immediate objectives**.

The diagram below clarifies the difference between **outputs**, **outcomes** and **impact**. (Fowler, 1997).

Point of Measurement	What is Measured	Indicators
Outputs	Effort	Implementation of activities
Outcomes	Effectiveness	Use of outputs and sustained production of benefits
Impact	Change	Difference from the original problem situation

2. The Complexity of Impact Assessment

There are three main difficulties in relation to the development of an appropriate methodology for impact assessment:

- Firstly, there is often confusion between the evaluation of a project or programme's **objectives** and an assessment of its **long-term impact**.
- Secondly, **evaluation tools** and **methodologies** are often poorly developed. This results in weaknesses in the chain of evidence from data collection through to analysis and conclusions.
- Thirdly, the issue of assessing impact **qualitatively** is very complex.

An OECD/DAC study on impact (Kruse et al, 1997) concluded that there was a lack of 'firm and reliable evidence' on the impact of NGO development projects and programmes, related to the 'paucity of data and weakness of evaluation methodologies'. Often project evaluations consisted of **descriptions of activities** carried out rather than any **analysis of the relevance** of what had been done. This was partly due to a lack of appropriate evaluation and assessment methodologies. A further reason was that insufficient attention had been paid to the development and use of appropriate **monitoring** processes and procedures. This was often compounded by the fact that many projects evolve and change over time. Whilst this is not a negative factor per se, it made tracking a project's progress and impact almost impossible when coupled with insufficient monitoring systems. The DAC Study concluded that it was very difficult to make an assessment of impact because having reviewed many evaluation reports there was clearly a very weak link between the information gathered and the conclusions drawn.

'There was not a clear chain of evidence' (Yin 1989).

The essential starting point in developing a methodology for assessing impact is the need to take a primarily **qualitative perspective**. It is therefore important to draw a clear distinction between a qualitative and a quantitative approach.

'Qualitative research attempts to persuade through rich depiction and strategic comparison across cases, thereby overcoming the abstraction inherent in quantitative studies' (Firestone 1987).

Firestone's definition (left) is helpful because it shows that the **scope** of an assessment defines the methodologies to be used, their application and the amount of time given to the assessment. Where the project or programme being assessed is very large, it is not necessary to assess all areas of the work but enough to gain a clear picture.

The scope of a specific assessment visit needs to be such that it will enable the assessment to be **reliable**, **valid** and **credible**. Validity and credibility are taken to mean 'are the results believable?' There are different understandings of how to assess validity. For example Cohen and Manion (1989) take a very **positivistic** stance and see validity as follows:

- Face validity** Are we measuring what we think we are measuring?
- Bias** Is there a tendency to make errors in one direction?
- Convergent validity** Is the information gained through one method validated by that gained through another method?
- Internal validity** Are the results genuine for this group?
- External validity** Are the results applicable to other situations?

In contrast others such as Maxwell (1992) take a highly **qualitative** approach. They argue that what matters in qualitative research is how well the data is interpreted and what claims are made from it. A mid point between these two extremes is taken by researchers such as Patton who see the validity of an assessment as based on the quality or '**information-richness**' of the data and the ability of the researcher to analyse it (Patton, 1990:185).

Organisations such as ODI, Oxfam and ActionAid, to name a few, have carried out important work on impact assessment. Oxfam and ActionAid have concentrated on taking a **naturalistic approach** to assessing impact. Their results point to difficulties in data collection and the tendency has been to recommend the need for detailed project monitoring and evaluation systems. Furthermore, a naturalistic approach is very time-consuming and costly. ODI have taken a different approach and proposed using the tool of **cost effectiveness analysis** as a basis for rapid assessments¹. However, they too have run into problems of limited availability of data.

3. Impact Assessment in Practice

Planning

- Ideally an impact assessment should be **built into** the project or programme design from the beginning, alongside the development and use of an appropriate **monitoring** system.
- The use and appropriateness of a **baseline study** is a question many NGOs have faced. Whilst baseline studies can be helpful, they often lack relevant data when assessed against an evaluation or impact assessment. This is often due to the fact that a project has had to adapt and change its approach. It is partly for this reason that more emphasis is now being placed on developing appropriate monitoring systems.

Participation

- The participation of different stakeholders in an assessment is important in terms of **ownership** and **sustainability** of the process and the **use** of the findings. It is important to bear in mind that evaluation and impact assessment processes are very much linked to the **ongoing development** process.
- In planning the assessment, it is essential to agree with all stakeholders what their **level of participation** will be. This ensures that the methodology can be applied in a similar way across all projects/programmes. There are a number of categorisations which can be used such as 'The Ladder of Participation' (Save the Children 1994). At a simpler level, Stephen Biggs (1989) defined participation in four levels:



- A key lesson learnt is that a participatory approach needs more **time** to ensure that all stakeholders are involved. The assessment visit needs to be long enough to allow the stakeholders to understand and own the information and analysis. It is clear that there is a minimum period of time below which the results are not believable to the stakeholders, however accurate they may be (Patton 1990).
- In trying to increase levels of participation, this raises the very real question of what **level of participation** can be achieved when impact assessment is used at a macro level. How feasible is it to involve all stakeholders fully? Is participation only feasible when stakeholders have similar or agreed objectives? This point is made in the ISODEC Review that found that the participation of stakeholders in assessments required a significant amount of time and commitment and could not be 'created' rapidly (Kamara and Roche, 1996: 14).

Data Collection Methods and Tools

A Qualitative Approach

- A qualitative approach uses qualitative assessment tools. The main tools used are focus groups, meeting key informants, analysis of secondary data and observation. These need to be chosen carefully on the basis of their **appropriateness** in assessing progress towards the indicators. Also, qualitative

¹ A concise explanation of cost effectiveness analysis is given in the 'Good Practice Review on Evaluating Humanitarian Assistance Programmes in Complex Emergencies' (Hallam, 1998).

data collection tools require **skill** in order to be used properly and effectively. The key question is: do they provide **reliable** and **valid** data of sufficient quantity and quality?

- Qualitative assessment tools, such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observation combined with analysis of secondary data form the basis for the **data collection** methods. In addition, more participatory tools such as mapping and ranking can be used, as long as they fulfil the criteria above and are not used in an extractive fashion.

The Concept of ‘Triangulation’

- ‘**Triangulation**’ is the cornerstone on which a methodology to assess impact must be based and from which the qualitative methods are applied. Triangulation is a means of addressing the issues of reliability and validity, because the **bias** in any one method is offset by using another. This does not mean that different methods are randomly selected and put together, but rather they are chosen so that they counteract the threats to validity identified in each. The key here is the **systematic application** of qualitative methods: ‘The accuracy of a method comes from it’s systematic application, but rarely does the inaccuracy of one approach to the data complement the accuracy of another,’ (Fielding and Fielding 1986).
- Triangulation can be applied by using a mixture of methods, tools, and perspectives, for example working in teams and using multiple data sources. The purpose of this is to give an acceptable degree of **objectivity** to the **subjective perspectives**.

Using a Team

- The methodology of using small teams of consultants for an assessment builds on the **Sondeo Method** described by Hildebrand (1979). For each assessment a small team is formed with two or three consultants from different disciplines. The team can work together with local NGO staff to form several ‘mini-teams’. The ‘mini-teams’ can be changed around during the course of the assessment to provide fresh insights.
- The strength of the **small team approach** lies in the breadth of perspectives that are included. In order to make best use of the different perspectives it is important to spend time at the beginning **briefing** the whole team, refining the data collection plan and assigning specific responsibilities (dependent on skills and experience).

The Use of Indicators

- The experience of organisations involved in impact assessments is that in developing a set of indicators it is essential to keep them to a **minimum**: ‘a manageable proportion based on key areas of change’ (Roche, 1999). For example, Tearfund’s approach was to have a small number of main or ‘meta’ indicators that were supported by a larger number of sub indicators and question areas (Adams et al. 1999).

In developing indicators in his work on impact with Oxfam, Chris Roche (1999) questioned the use of the acronym ‘**SMART**’ (Specific; Measurable; Achievable; Realistic; Time-bound) to define the properties of an indicator as too narrow. He proposed that indicators should also be ‘**SPICED**’ (Subjective; Participatory; Interpreted and Communicable; Cross Checked and Compared; Empowering; Diverse and Disaggregated).

A Rating or Scoring System

- One of the difficulties with developing a methodology is the need for data to be compared **over time** and **between cases**. Where a methodology will be used by a number of different people, a 5-point scoring or rating system to **cross-check** data can be used. It is intended to be a support to the narrative data and to assist **comparison** between reports. It is not intended to replace or overshadow the qualitative perspectives and reports, nor to be used as a checklist of questions. Alkire (1997) uses a qualitative grading system using a 0 - 5 scale in the ‘Oxfam Versus Poverty’ paper. Likewise, Feurstein makes a brief mention of the use of scoring in her work (Feurstein, 1986: 99-102). The basis of the ‘scoring’ system could be as follows:

Scale					
N/A	1	2	3	4	5
Not Relevant	Very Weak	Weak	Average	Strong	Very Strong

An example of a scoring system where semantic ends were developed is given below:

TO EMPOWER: Capacity	Point 1	Point 5
1. Evidence of policies/strategies which ensure an empowering management process	Unclear	Clear
2. Methods of leadership and delegation which empower	Disempowering	Empowering
3. Evidence of structures or forums owned by staff	Little evidence	Much evidence
4. Level of hope and belief in their ability to change for the better	Low	High

(Adams 2000, unpublished).

- The scoring system facilitates **comparison**. However, the scores only make sense with the support of the **narrative** and regular 'in situ' **debriefings** so that the consultancy team can share impressions. At the end of the assessment, the team draw their findings together to get an average score for each 'meta' and sub indicator.

5. Key Learning Points from Assessments of NGO Impact

In 1998/99 both INTRAC and Tearfund embarked on separate but similar impact assessment exercises based on a **disciplined qualitative approach** such as that outlined above. The INTRAC exercise related to a review of Danish NGO activities in Developing Countries for Danida, using three detailed country studies. The Tearfund exercise made an assessment of the organisation's impact on its partners and ultimate beneficiaries, based on twelve partner studies in twelve countries. Both exercises analysed the use and application of **methodologies** and interestingly came to similar conclusions. Following on from the Danida Study, INTRAC has been involved in two further impact studies, including one with the European Community. This included 40 partner case studies across six countries. The EC Study was important in that it showed the feasibility of applying the methodology using different teams of consultants. A number of key learning points emerged from these studies.

The Skills Needed for Impact Assessment

The ODI studies identified the need to develop a **simple** and **easy to use** methodology (Riddell, 1990). An important point made in the OECD/DAC study from a number of the impact assessments reviewed was that they gave little detail as to how they arrived at their conclusions, often relying on personal judgement (Kruse et al, 1997). Therefore, in order for there to be a clear link between the data collected and the conclusions drawn, the consultants involved need to have the **skills** and **experience** to use the different assessment tools. Furthermore, the process of carrying out an assessment needs to be **closely managed** so that different perspectives are cross-checked through **triangulation** of the teams' information.

The type of methodology based on short assessment visits made by teams of consultants requires specific management skills. Compared with the naturalistic approaches used in longitudinal studies, for example by Oxfam, Ghana (Kamara and Roche, 1996), it is apparent that the level of skills needed is higher and the management of the consultants is more critical. In this respect there is a very clear cost to shortening the period of **time** of the assessment in terms of the **level of skills** needed. Managing the process well is critical to ensuring that the triangulation of data, approaches and tools is carried out properly. Good **planning** of an assessment prior to the fieldwork stage is essential, as is the **debriefing** at the end. As important, and often left out, is the **in-country briefing**, orientation and daily support of the team. This is essential to ensure that they use the data collection tools correctly and that they continue to observe, share and learn from each other throughout the whole visit.

The Comparability of Data

A key finding from the Tearfund study was the usefulness and feasibility of using a simple **scoring system** to allow the different data sets to be compared. The difference between the first study that did not use a scoring system and the later ones that did was clearly marked. This is significant because it is not commonly used in NGO studies, as illustrated by the limited information about scoring in development literature.

Participation

The participation of stakeholders is a critical area to address because of its fundamental importance to NGOs and their approach to development. The key lesson emerging is that the more participatory the approach, the more **time** is needed to ensure that all stakeholders are involved. The assessment visit needs to be long enough to allow time for the stakeholders to understand and own the information and analysis. In this respect, the statement by House (in Patton, 1990) of the importance of persuading the 'audience', is helpful in that it shows a limitation in applying the methodology. It is clear that there is a minimum period of time below which the results are **not believable** to the stakeholders, however accurate they may be.

The Use of Different Tools

Whilst each of the different tools - analysis of secondary data, beneficiary assessment, self assessment, interviews, focus groups and so forth - is useful, each requires skill in application and needs to be complemented by other tools. This bears out the statements by Fielding and Fielding (1986) on the importance of selecting the **right tools** and then using them so that through triangulation an accurate picture is built up.

6. Combining a Structured Methodology with an Open Approach

The above examples illustrate the importance of developing a structured methodology in order to address the concerns raised in the DAC/OECD study. In 2000, INTRAC was involved in an impact assessment of the IBIS Life Science Programme in Namibia that sought to take on board the need for a **well-structured methodology**. At the same time, it recognised the importance of not being confined to a structured set of tools and question areas and of **being open** to explore positive and negative impacts of the project. This study was important in exploring the tension between maintaining a rigorous structure whilst at the same time being open to other influences and possibilities.

The methodology of the Ibis Life Science Project Impact Assessment attempted to be in keeping with the ethos and aims of the Programme. Thus, the approaches to the data gathering, analysis and presentation were based on **participatory** approaches. One of the main approaches used was that of a **structured interactive workshop**, an approach that has also been used effectively by ActionAid in Uganda (IA Exchange 2000). This tool was used as a data-gathering exercise with learners, teachers and facilitators meeting in a number of schools. This was followed by a two-day workshop involving a number of different stakeholders as a means of discussing and analysing the data collected.

One of the challenges the impact assessment team needed to overcome was how to present information and ideas as a **platform** for further discussion and input. The use of a draft report was seen to be too confining and narrow for this, therefore the team used a **graphic** of a tree as a means of expressing ideas and thoughts about the process of the project and possible impacts. This was very helpful because participants were not overwhelmed with information and facts, yet at the same time were presented with a lot of detail on a complex process running for nearly ten years. The strength of using a graphic appeared to be in its non-confrontational nature. Participants at the workshop were comfortable to go up to the graphic and add comments to the picture or discuss possible adjustments to its format. There appeared to be more **ownership** and **engagement** with the process and far less feeling that a report had been 'written in stone' and could not be altered.

The Positive Tension between a Structured Methodology and an Open Approach

This assessment recognised the importance of using a structured approach. At the same time, the use of open and less structured workshops ensured that it did not become **limited** by the application of the **methodology**. The lesson here would appear to be that both are needed and that there is a tension in the amount of time and importance or weight given to each. Using an open approach is very time-consuming both in terms of its use and analysis.

Ownership of the Process

Whilst the methodology used a number of different tools and perspectives to triangulate data, the additional workshop gave an opportunity for different stakeholders to engage with the process and to take ownership of its inputs and outputs. Stakeholders gain an important and unanticipated benefit from this as they begin to

make use of the outputs of the assessment and to have some input into the form those outputs should take.

Impact Assessment as a Process, not a Final Act

One of the difficulties in trying to assess impact is that it can actually occur at a number of **different stages** of a project or even long after a project has finished. It can also occur outside the project area and to groups of people who are not involved in the process. In this respect, the definitions of impact assessment are not helpful as they can imply that impact is a goal to be reached/achieved and that once achieved it cannot be lost. The Ibis study recognised that impact can happen at a number of different points both **during** and **after** the project process. In using workshops, stakeholders had an opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved and to take it further. Thus, the actual process of the impact assessment is contributing to the **sustainability** of the impact.

A Definition of Impact Assessment or a Set of Qualities?

The Ibis Impact Assessment process questioned whether a definition of impact needs to incorporate the concept of **long term sustainable change**, or whether in fact it is more accurate to define impact as a **process** where the sustainability of that process is dependant on a number of factors. In Namibia for example, a key constraint to the sustainability of some of the impacts of the Life Science Project is the negative impact of HIV/AIDS.

7. Conclusion: Future Directions

- Impact assessment **methodologies** need to incorporate a structure that can act as a **framework** as well as using more **open approaches**, such as workshops, and to have the capacity to hold them in a **creative tension**.
- The actual approach used in carrying out impact assessments needs to be appropriate to making an assessment of an **ongoing process** rather than a completed task. In this respect, models need to be developed which involve an impact assessment team coming alongside the project and working with the different stakeholders and then at an appropriate and agreed point moving away.
- Following on from the above point, it is essential to develop an understanding of the assessment of impact as **understanding a series of processes**. If 'impact' is seen as 'nailing jelly to the wall' (Edwards and Hulme 1995) and then defining it in a rigid way, then the process of assessment will lose the dynamism and structure that gives it shape and meaning. All that will remain will be fragmented and meaningless pieces of information.
- Where does the impact assessment process **begin** and **end**? We need to move beyond thinking of a simple beginning and ending to thinking of a process which will be different for different stakeholders.
- Linked to the above, we need to move away from the current structure of one output at the end of the process to **multiple outputs**, in different formats and at different stages and times.

Further Reading

The results from the study of assessing the impact of DANIDA's support to Danish NGOs can be viewed on the website: http://www.um.dk/danida/ngoimpact/synthese_eng

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Oakley, P., Pratt, B. and Clayton, A. (1998) *Outcomes and Impact: Evaluating Change in Social Development*. Oxford: INTRAC. ISBN 1-897748-21-3.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

- DAC Development Assistance Committee (of the OECD)
 ODI Overseas Development Institute
 OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

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