

Impact Assessment: A Tool for Evidence-based Programming or for Self-Marketing?

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Since the search for ways to measure the impact of social development work gained an urgency in the mid 1990s, the debate has proceeded in several directions, with various methodologies devised to meet specific requirements. Whilst some would regard the search for ways to measure impact as an extension of the more familiar ways of monitoring and evaluation of a particular intervention – with an emphasis on identifying long-term, sustainable, planned and unplanned changes – others see impact measurement as something rather different. In recent years there has been a trend for the measurement of impact to be seen as more to do with understanding the process of social change at a wider level (wider than individual project or programme work), in order to inform our practice. Whilst there are good and sound reasons for focussing attention on the nature of social change at this wider level, we would argue that this is a valid approach for assessing impact only in terms of understanding the contribution made of given interventions to that social change. Impact assessment needs to be reclaimed as a tool for making (cautious and well reasoned) judgements about different approaches to social development. At worst, the current trend for measuring agency wide ‘global impact assessment’ seems to be adapting impact measurement to serve as a tool for the marketing department – identifying in rather loose ways ‘plausible linkages’ between long-term social change and given interventions. We argue that the need for rigour in our methodology is all-important.

1. Origins of the Search for the Impact of NGO Work

By the 1990s, the world had experienced approximately 40 years of development work and people were asking what there was to show for it all. Different models and approaches had been followed by different donors: investment in large infrastructure projects; investment in key sectors; rural development, and then integrated rural development projects; selective investment in productive capacity based on calculations of expected rates of return; support to countries to restructure their economies in order to attract appropriate investments; and now a return to sectoral policies through donor support to government budgets. And, at the same time, the NGOs were, arguably, having a greater impact on many local people’s lives in the developing world through their smaller scale, participatory, grass-roots projects and linked advocacy work. However widespread this latter belief was, it was regarded as just that – an unsubstantiated belief. There was pressure, from both inside the NGOs, who wanted to ‘scale up’ the approaches that worked, and from outside – from the donors who wanted to see whether the NGOs had a secret answer, to demonstrate the real impact of their work.

In the mid 1990s the OECD/DAC Expert Group on Aid Evaluation commissioned a study on the impact of NGO work (Riddell et al. 1997), which reviewed selected evaluation reports from a range of both donors and NGOs. The study set out both to examine the impact of NGO work and review the methods used to ascertain impact. It examined 60 reports covering 240 projects, and undertook 13 country case studies, and it concluded that most of the donor commissioned studies assessed impact against specific criteria¹, whereas the NGO commissioned studies

¹ These were: the achievement of stated objectives; impact in terms of poverty reach; alleviation of poverty and the degree of participation; sustainability (financial and institutional); cost effectiveness;

tended to address 'narrower questions'. NGO studies attached more importance to participation and accountability downwards to beneficiaries and demonstrated a range of innovative approaches and a wide use of participatory methods of evaluation. These NGO studies were generally undertaken for internal learning purposes, rather than to demonstrate accountability, and tended not to be available to the general public.

However, the DAC Study concluded that both donor and NGO commissioned reports suffered from a lack of detailed information on impact – they lacked credible data, and where data existed this tended to focus on outputs. There was, in general, a lack of both poverty analysis (the measurement of the ultimate objective of most social development work) and of cost effectiveness analysis (at the narrower end of assessing alternative ways of achieving impact). Whilst the study noted the importance of wider context in influencing project and programme outcome, and the centrality of capacity building as a major component for ensuring impact, it concluded that there is the need for more information and higher quality data with which to assess impact. As part of this, more work needed to be done to develop appropriate methods and tools with which to assess NGO development interventions (Riddell et al. 1997).

2. Demonstrating or Understanding Impact?

Since 1997, impact assessments have been institutionalised by most INGOs and explored by many smaller agencies. However, confusion exists around the purpose of impact assessment – demonstrating impact or understanding the process of impact?

It is useful to examine the wide range of interpretations of what is meant by impact. The definition given by OECD/DAC in 2002 is fairly general: 'The positive and negative, primary and secondary, long term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended.' (OECD/DAC 2002) However, at one end of the spectrum of interpretations of impact assessment, we find the approach and methodologies associated with demonstrating impact. This is the approach that is suggested by the log frame: impact assessment as verification that project outcomes are indeed having the intended impact. At this end of the spectrum we also find approaches, previously favoured by the large scale multi-nationals with budgets to undertake huge studies, which seek to measure impact through large scale statistical studies, using before and after, with and without data sets. For those with the budgets and the expertise for such studies, we suggest such approaches can be useful. However, most NGOs are not in that league. We neither have the funds nor the time, and possibly not the expertise, for such huge studies. Equally important for NGOs is the belief that understanding and measuring social change may not be so simple. The model of change suggested by the log frame is thought to be too simplistic, assuming that a specific intervention has a linear, causal effect, when the reality is more complex. Such approaches can also privilege the importance of particular interventions (our interventions) and ignore the effects of any local intervention or contextual changes.

Roche (1999) focused our attention on the other end of the range of interpretations of impact assessment, stressing understanding the nature and patterns of social change, usually at the micro level, then working backwards to assess how much of a contribution our intervention has made. Whereas the methodologies associated with demonstrating impact (outlined above) can be termed 'inside-out', or 'organisation-out', Roche urged us to adopt an 'outside-in' or 'context-in' approach. This would place our intervention within the wider context and enable us to understand the relative importance of interventions in relation to other changes going on.

innovation and flexibility; replicability and scaling up; gender impact; environmental impact, and impact in terms of advancing democracy, pluralism and strengthening civil society.

Implications for Methodologies

Whether we adopt an ‘inside-out’ or ‘outside-in’ approach, NGOs have tended to supplement any quantitative methods of measuring impact with a wide range of qualitative, often participatory, methods. Such methods have been seen to be important, since part of our mandate is about giving voice to the marginalised; it is thus crucial to understand impact from the point of view of the communities with whom we work. More recent developments elaborating on ‘outside-in’ methodologies have developed new and innovative ways of focusing discussion on social change, and ways to determine the contribution of specific interventions to this change. Thus we have concepts such as ‘plausible association’, and methodologies such as ‘most significant change’. And some agencies are exploring the use of relatively new methodologies, such as outcome-mapping and contribution analysis. All these methodologies are useful and important for our learning; however, we would argue that we need to be vigilant in ensuring that we do not become sloppy in their application.

The Rise of Performance Measurement and Performance Management – the Need to Demonstrate Agency-Wide Results

At the same time as these developments in thinking about impact assessment, there has been a more general increased focus on the need to demonstrate *results*. This is the current trend in the public sector in both the developed and developing world. It is linked with the focus on strategic vision and target setting, and is thought to be another way of encouraging the accountability of public sector actors. Targets can be set at project, sector, or country level, and at even higher levels². Those larger NGOs and donor agencies that have adopted agency-wide strategic targets, in an effort to focus their work on the achievement of real social change, now feel obliged (or want) to show that they are making a difference. Thus, the search for impact has now become linked to the need to demonstrate achievement of strategic targets.³

As the OECD/DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation noted: ‘...establishing performance measurement and management systems at...corporate or agency wide level is now taking on urgent importance in many donor agencies as they face increasing public pressures and government wide mandates requiring annual reporting on agency wide performance and results.’ (Binnendijk 2001:4). However, this need to demonstrate achievement of strategic objectives is leading to a misuse of methodologies designed for localised learning and evidence-based programming.

² At the broadest level, the Millennium Development Goals can be seen as such targets designed to focus, and encourage co-operation between, interventions.

³ For example SCF’s Global Impact Assessment Framework examines its programmes in terms of contribution to its Five Dimensions of Change, which are: change in the lives of children and young people; change in policies and practices affecting children’s and young peoples’ lives; change in equity and non-discrimination of children and young people; change in civil societies and communities’ capacities to support children’s rights. Similarly Oxfam measures its global impact in relation to its five aims: the right to a sustainable livelihood; the right to basic social services; the right to life and security; the right to be heard; the right to equity; gender and diversity.

Return to a Focus on Evidence-Based Programming?

Whilst there are well documented risks associated with the institutionalised need to demonstrate impact,⁴ the more rigorous systems put in place by larger INGOs do seem to be a mechanism whereby real learning, at local levels, can take place. However, the task many INGOs have taken on to assess their global impact risks degenerating into a glossy marketing exercise. Whilst the process itself is often relatively rigorous⁵ in that it involves all regional offices in a series of analytical discussions about the impacts of various interventions, the value of this localised learning can get lost. As with all monitoring and evaluation systems which feed results up through the reporting line, by the time localised discussions have been filtered and aggregated for the global impact report, the resulting document would appear to be more useful for the marketing department than as a tool for evidence-based planning. The danger, to our mind, is that the acceptance of such reports and associated methodologies as representative of what is meant by impact assessment means that impact assessment is no longer seen as a tool to improve our evidence-based programming. This, linked with the tendency to use 'soft measures' of impact which may be valid and useful for joint learning processes at local level, but perhaps less valid for demonstrating impact for accountability purposes,⁶ means that the process of impact assessment is at risk of becoming meaningless.⁷

We need to remind ourselves that the original drive for measuring the impact of our work was the recognised need to base our interventions on evidence of what works. The 1997 DAC study demonstrated that there was a lack of credible evidence about impact. We know that measuring inputs and outputs, whilst important for management purposes, cannot tell us whether our interventions are having significant impact, or whether the impact is, indeed, positive. We needed to document and analyse the evidence about the long-term consequences of our work.

An evidence base for programming is predicated on the idea that, once we have such an evidence base, an intervention should be replicable and show impact in different settings and at different times.⁸ This will encourage the use of procedures and approaches that have been

⁴ As Chapman and Wallace (2004) state: 'The growing reporting requirements increase this pressure to show in a positive light everything that has been done.' (34) Darcy and Hofmann (2003) argue that the need to talk every thing up encourages risk averse behaviour. The 2001 DAC report on results based management stated, 'There is some concern within donor agencies that performance measurement and reporting tasks, often required by government ... may be 'crowding out' evaluations. That is they may be competing with the same increasingly scarce staff time and other resources.' (Binnendijk 2001:14)

⁵ Oxfam's annual Impact Reporting requires field staff to produce annual impact reports on a sample of projects selected according to criteria set each year. This process is supplemented by other processes which aim to gather the learning from the various programmes: facilitated reviews; the new programme audits using a peer review process; in-depth strategic evaluations carried out by experienced evaluation teams; long-term research which monitors changes in people's lives, identifying influencing factors, including the impact of Oxfam's programme work; and stakeholder surveys.

⁶ As Davies and Dart (2005) state, 'In our experience, MSC (Most Significant Change) is suited to monitoring that focuses on learning rather than just accountability. It is also an appropriate tool when you are interested in the effect of the intervention on people's lives and keen to include the words of non-professionals.' (13)

⁷ Of course measuring impact at agency level using 'hard measures of impact' itself poses methodological problems: 'assessing impact at the organisational level raises major difficulties around the question of aggregation and the comparability of data from different contexts.' (Darcy and Hofmann 2003: 23)

⁸ Evidence-based programming has two elements. It requires the collection of evidence about the long-term impact of different approaches and interventions. It also requires that decision makers base their judgments on the evidence. However, here we are concerned about building the body of evidence.

shown to work. The contextual differences, arising from different geographical and cultural situations, should also be documented as part of the development of our evidence base.

In talking about the development of evidence, we often refer to the medical analogy. The original body of medical evidence was based on rigorous and well-documented description and observation. Subsequent rigour in demonstrating the effect, or impact, of particular treatments has required scientific procedures to demonstrate attribution. Whilst there are difficulties in transferring the same methods to the social development field, where outcomes are dependent both on many interventions (ours and others'), the contexts, and individual actors' behaviours – the principal is the same: in order to build our learning about what works, we need to develop our evidence base in as rigorous a way as possible.

So, in terms of impact assessment, we return to the fact that we can use 'softer' (outside-in) or 'harder' (inside-out) methods of measuring impact. Softer methods can be useful for management purposes and reflect the way we, as individuals, develop our own evidence bases as we learn from our experiences. Nevertheless, in terms of our work, these methods need to be well documented, rigorous and tested. Harder, more statistically based methods may be required for purposes of demonstrating hard proof – these methods are more likely to be used by larger agencies, donors or academic departments – and should, in principle, be welcomed.

Whatever methodologies we are using, this is a plea for a return to the original objectives of impact analysis: that of developing our understanding of the impact of interventions in order to improve our programming. This may mean deciding that trying to define the global impact of an agency is not a useful approach, at least not in the way it is being done at present.

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