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OP-ED: Evaluating development impacts —*Syed Mohammad Ali*



It is best to let the beneficiaries decide for themselves what they want to change, how they want to do this and also what results their efforts have borne. Greater acknowledgement of those who are being influenced by social development processes could yield more meaningful evaluative information for policy-making

Arguments concerning the incidence of poverty and the means being used to reduce it have reemerged following the release of the latest Economic Survey of Pakistan. Government claims of decreasing poverty are estimated using an income based poverty line, which in itself cannot adequately capture the extent of deprivation implied by poverty.

Poverty is a complex phenomenon and this makes its estimation and subsequent alleviation equally difficult. It is in recognition of this fact that there is now a wide range of development strategies proffered to tackle poverty. Many of these strategies go beyond focusing on material aspects of deprivation in order to acknowledge the need for undertaking social development as a means of empowering poor people and making them active participants in the process of their own development.

While the need for a more comprehensive approach towards poverty is not disputed, it is even harder to gauge the effects of social development efforts because efforts meant to empower the poor or to ensure their active participation in development are not readily quantifiable. However, the need to evaluate the impact of social development processes trying to alleviate poverty or deal with other human needs and environmental concerns is quite understandable.

Evaluation in development has to do with judgement, measurement and analysis and is thus critical in terms of ensuring that any project is moving towards accomplishing its intended objectives. Evaluations allow an assessment based on which a decision concerning replication, extension or closing down of project activities can be made. However, the dominant forms of development evaluation give precedence to measurement, and thus try to assign a numerical value to a range of supposed outcomes. Evaluations in practice are therefore focused on efficiency in terms of fixed outputs, which are used to justify expenditure of resources. Common tools for these types of evaluations are cost benefit analyses, which is quantitative in nature and accesses the merits of a project in terms of return on investment. While useful for keeping a track of project activities, quantitative evaluations are less helpful with non-material dimensions, like that of inculcating greater commitment of communities to environmental issues.

Social development projects are not only difficult to measure but in fact their very objectives make it difficult to predict beforehand what their outcomes should be. This is where a lot of development projects make the mistake of using very stringent indicators to measure the processes of social change. Change is unpredictable and it is very difficult in real life to predict what the outcome of an objective like empowerment would be.

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The question then is how to measure non-production related social change. Qualitative evaluations of social development are possible but they have their own prerequisites. Such evaluations need to be participatory and flexible in order to describe and identify what really happens as a result of a project, rather than trying to taint or harness that effect into specific organisational imperatives. Evaluation of social change certainly cannot take place on the basis of predetermined expectations. After all it is not necessary that gender equity will necessarily result in greater use of contraceptives. These are the kinds of presumptions rampant amidst current development programs and due to the inappropriateness of using pre-formulated lines of inquiry, that effects of social development are often not accurately accessed.

Evaluating social development processes therefore needs close and continuous contact with participants of particular programs. Generally speaking, qualitative evaluation should be more concerned with describing rather than interpreting information to make sweeping statements about the nature and extent of social development taking place (although in practice this latter trend is much too common). Objectivity still remains a problem for evaluation of social development projects. In this regard, it is important that implicit value judgements of different development organisations should not be used to judge the merit of programme. If empowerment is the goal, it does not mean that the empowered must necessarily undertake more savings or become politically active. Placing stringent conditions on people's action is itself detrimental to the goal of social development. Ultimately social development is meant to provide people with the awareness and capacity needed to make better choices for improving their lives, not to follow rigid paths to achieve this stated goal.

It is unfortunate that a more enlightened approach towards evaluating development efforts has not pervaded beyond the level of rhetoric. Consider for example the consultative process initiated prior to the formulation of the recently finalised Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) in Pakistan. Despite its stated emphasis on involving communities in the process of determining a suitable poverty reduction strategy, the consultative process for the PRSP did not really reflect incorporation of such viewpoints. Several civil society organisations refused to engage in this consultative process altogether due to its stringent agenda. They rightly pointed out that devolution of responsibility within development programmes cannot be limited to implementation only, real participation implies that stakeholders be allowed the right to determine the specific approaches needed to meet programme goals.

Yet social development projects are increasingly patronised by donors as a prerequisite to ensure sustainable development. However, development practitioners need to change their approach towards evaluating these projects. They need to enhance planning and decision-making at the local level and avoid authoritative practices when executing or evaluating social development projects. Specifically in terms of designing evaluations for these programmes, development organisations need to adopt credible alternatives to managerial, policy driven impact assessments. Action research techniques or a range of interactive evaluation methods proven to work effectively on ground could serve this purpose well.

Moreover, social development projects must aim to facilitate a genuinely felt momentum of change. It is best to let the beneficiaries decide for themselves what they want to change, how they want to do this and also what results their efforts have borne. Greater acknowledgement of those who are being influenced by social development processes could yield more meaningful evaluative information for policy-making. More participatory evaluation of development impacts would thus provide a real sense of community ownership of social development initiatives, which is imperative for achieving sustainable human development.

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