

Impact assessment: seeing the wood *and* the trees

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'Not everything that counts can be counted. And not everything that can be counted counts.' (Albert Einstein)

This paper summarises the results of a joint action-research project undertaken by a number of international and local NGOs, based on four continents and initiated by Oxfam GB and Novib from the Netherlands. The full report of this work and the case studies are available elsewhere.¹ Stan Thekaekara's contribution, included in this volume, was one of these case studies. The purpose of this research project was to gain a more direct understanding of impact assessment than could be obtained from the voluminous literature on the subject, and to test out a variety of approaches in a range of contexts with varied types of organisation.

The paper begins by situating the discussion of impact assessment in the broader context of a growing critique of international NGOs (INGOs), before going on to describe some of the historical antecedents of various approaches to impact assessment and to explain how this was defined for the purposes of the research project. Before a consideration of the research findings, one of the key issues that impact assessment processes need to address – power and participation – is discussed. The paper ends by exploring some of the broader policy issues that emerge from the findings, notably in relation to the organisational context; poverty and gender impacts; the links between resource allocation and impact assessment; and how impact assessment, in combination with other changes, might help international NGOs not only to achieve more, but also to be more accountable.

Why impact assessment?

Despite the barrage of statistics and analysis that have appeared in recent UNDP and World Bank reports which show a marked improvement in a number of indicators of human well-being, the scale of world poverty remains a scandal which shames us all. In many parts of the world, inequality, insecurity, and conflict are growing at alarming rates. Although official aid has had its critics for many years, as we ended the old millennium a growing number of challenges to NGOs echoed in our ears (de Waal 1996; Sogge 1996; Smillie 1995). Taken together, these describe a vicious circle which entraps the NGO sector – particularly in the North – and which the sector itself has helped to create. This circle has five main elements:

- increasing pressure to show results and impact;
- increased competition between NGOs;
- the growing need for public profile and press coverage in order to raise funds and to facilitate advocacy work;
- poor institutional learning and weak accountability mechanisms, both to those whom NGOs seek to support, and to those who provide the funds to them;
- the almost total absence of professional norms and standards.²

In a climate of increased competition, individual NGOs, and the sector as a whole, have therefore tended to exaggerate the case for support, just as their opponents tend to exaggerate the case against. This has two potential and enduring dangers, which have been pointed out for some time (Cassen 1986; Riddell 1987). First, the support for development cooperation must be based on the public's belief in its effectiveness. The moral case for such support depends upon its achieving the objectives for which it is given. However, a reluctance to admit that the effectiveness of much that is done is unpredictable and difficult to assess makes not just NGOs, but international cooperation programmes in general, vulnerable to public scrutiny and polemic attack.

Second, the case for cooperation must not create the belief that aid flows constitute the sole, or even principal, means available to the donors and governments of improving the welfare of people living in poverty. It is often the case that other policy and practice changes, in areas such as macro-economic stability, improved terms of trade, or debt relief, may be more beneficial, or at least be preconditions for the positive impact of aid (UNDP 1999).

The case for cooperation can be sustained in the long run only by more effective assessment and demonstration of its impact, by not concealing the mistakes and uncertainties that are inherent in this type of work, and by an honest assessment of the comparative effectiveness of development cooperation versus other policy and practice changes.

Historical overview of impact assessment

Initial approaches to impact assessment date from the 1950s and were essentially about predicting, before the start, the likely environmental, social, and economic impacts of a given project – and approving, adjusting, or rejecting the project as a result. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), Social Impact Assessment (SIA), Cost–Benefit Analysis (CBA), and Social Cost-Benefit Analysis (SCBA) were some of the key methods used to do this (see Howes 1992). In recent years, there have been several efforts to integrate social and environmental impact assessments into more coherent forms (for example, Barrow 1997). Impact analysis, on the other hand, was basically confined to an assessment of impact several years after the project was finished.

The next generation of planning in official agencies saw the introduction of Logical Framework Analysis (LFA or ‘logframe’) which, along with its variants, is today the most common planning framework used by bilateral and multilateral agencies. From the early 1980s, many methods of enquiry emerged which sought to make people and communities subjects and active participants in development, rather than objects of it. Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) – now often termed Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) – Participatory Action Research (PAR), and other methods all blossomed during this period (see Chambers 1997). At the same time, approaches to the evaluation of social development (Marsden and Oakley 1991) and ‘Fourth Generation’ ideas about evaluation (Guba and Lincoln 1989) have built on historical and anthropological theories and see evaluation as the negotiation of differing opinions and perspectives. This latter approach, in combination with participatory methods, seeks to understand the opinions of different interest groups by including the contributions of those whose voices are normally excluded. In recent years, national-level planning and development strategies have also started to include Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs), which seek to incorporate local perspectives and opinions generated through participatory research methods within national frameworks (Norton and Stephens 1995).

These various approaches have been described as being situated in either a 'modernisation' paradigm or a 'participation' paradigm (Howes 1992), where the former refers to an approach largely premised on promoting economic and infrastructural development as a means for 'developing' nations to catch up with the 'First' World. By contrast, the participation approach starts from the belief that poverty is primarily caused by injustice and inequality, and that overcoming poverty is not possible without the full participation of people. In this paradigm, outsiders have to relinquish control and act as catalysts for locally owned processes of empowerment and development. A limited participation approach also exists, in Howes' view, representing a sort of compromise between these two poles, and which was most apparent in the move within multilateral agencies to embrace participation and participatory approaches, while retaining a strong planning tradition and emphasis on economic development.

What do we mean by impact assessment?

The working definition of impact initially adopted by Oxfam GB and Novib was '*sustained changes in people's lives brought about by a particular intervention*'. Impact thus referred not to the immediate outputs or effects of a project or programme, but to the lasting and sustained changes that these brought about. Impact assessment therefore was defined as an evaluation of how, and to what extent, those changes had occurred. This required an understanding of the perspectives of all the stakeholders involved, as well as the social, economic, and political context in which the development intervention takes place.

However, following the first stage of the research, it became clear that, particularly in areas experiencing rapid and unpredictable change, such as conflict zones or emergency situations, the emphasis on 'sustained' or 'lasting' change was a problem. In such cases it was obvious that, for example, the provision of clean water could, literally, save someone's life; and that this could only be described as a significant impact, if not a lasting one. The modified definition of impact therefore became '*significant or lasting changes in people's lives, brought about by a given action or series of actions*'. In other words, programmes can make an important difference to people's lives, even if that change is not sustained over time.

The consultant recruited to review the existing literature, and to undertake some initial discussions with counterpart organisations of

Oxfam GB and Novib, also proposed that, given the complexity of the task, there should be two different levels of impact assessment: a narrow level, in relation to the original objectives of the project, and a broader level, which would involve the study of overall changes, positive or negative, intended or not, caused by a project. All the case studies, while recognising the importance of assessing performance against objectives, opted for a broader definition, along the lines given above. What therefore emerged was the following:

Impact assessment is the systematic analysis of the lasting or significant changes – positive or negative, intended or not – in people’s lives, brought about by a given action or series of actions.

It further became clear that although impact assessment is about systematic analysis, it is also centrally about *judgements* of what change is considered ‘significant’ for whom, and by whom; views which will often differ according to class, gender, age, etc. These judgements are also dependent on the context within which they are made. This led us to the important point that change is brought about *by a combination* of the activities of a given project or programme and the ongoing dynamics of the context in which these activities occur.

For the purposes of impact assessment, these issues are important, because they remind us that development and change are not ever solely the product of a managed process undertaken by development agencies and NGOs through projects and programmes. Rather, they are the result of broader and historical processes that are the outcome of many social, political, and environmental factors, including power struggles between interest groups. Understanding these processes is important if the changes brought about by a given project or programme are to be properly situated in their broader context.

Power and participation

If impact is defined as ‘significant’ or ‘lasting’ change, the key questions then become not only what has changed, whether it is significant, and the degree to which it can be attributed to a given set of actions, but, equally, *who decides?*

Despite the efforts made in the case studies, in many situations some groups, notably women and children, were consistently excluded from ‘participatory’ exercises. It was also clear that in some emergency

situations, there may also be real logistical and political limits to participation. The case studies also revealed that even among the group of participating NGOs, there were several differing interpretations of the term 'participation', as well as different criteria for assessing its quality or depth. Given the growing importance that is being attached to participation, not just among NGOs but also in bilateral and multilateral agencies, the absence of clear agreements and standards for assessing the quality of participation seems particularly problematic.

While the scientific tradition sets out clear criteria for judging the quality of research, based on notions of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity, as yet there is no such broad agreement as to what the criteria for assessing the quality of participatory research might be. Some attempts to do this have been made, for example by Jules Pretty and others, building on the work of Guba and Lincoln. Pretty has adapted the criteria used to assess the quality of conventional research in order to find equivalent, but alternative, criteria for participatory processes of inquiry. These are based on the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Pretty 1994; Guba and Lincoln 1989). The findings from the case studies suggest that, in cases where impact assessment is primarily initiated by external agencies, these criteria will also need to include the following factors:

- a process or time-schedule that is mutually acceptable to people (and particularly women) in communities and to the researchers or assessors;
- efficient use of existing sources of information, so as not to waste people's time in collecting data that are already available;
- the development and evolution of methods based on a mutual analysis of their strengths and weaknesses;
- the extent to which the information that is gathered actually has an impact i.e. actually produces change in practices or policies of the project or organisation being assessed.

The important difference between the scientific tradition and qualitative approaches is the degree to which the observer or the researcher is believed capable of remaining independent of what s/he is observing or measuring. In the scientific method this is generally deemed essential, and therefore a lot of effort goes into designing measurement tools, experiments, and methods of analysis which attempt to ensure this. In more participatory and qualitative research, on the other hand, it is

believed that the researchers or observers are necessarily a part of what they observe, and that their own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours will determine, at least in part, the information gathered. Emphasis is therefore put on the quality and depth of engagement and particularly on cross-checking findings from several perspectives ('triangulation').

These differences are often couched in terms of a fight between views of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity'. In fact, the issue may be more usefully debated in terms of how to avoid bias in any given method of assessment, rather than posing the dilemma in terms of the two stark oppositional poles. If we pose the question in this way, we can ask whether the prolonged process of participant observation adopted in the Matson study (described by Thekaekara in this volume) may have been biased to emphasise the views of particular groups within the community. Or whether a large household survey based on random sampling undertaken in the study by BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) reduced bias by ensuring a representative sample of village organisations was selected for study (see Husain 1998). In other words, the context of the study and the type of activity being assessed will determine the approach adopted and the mix of methods and tools employed. The various tools and methods within that mix will be subject to differing criteria or standards, i.e. a questionnaire survey which seeks quantitative information from a representative sample of a given population would have different quality criteria from a series of focus-group discussions exploring how changes in attitudes to gender relations had been brought about. However, the study as a whole, as well as the individual methods adopted, should be assessed by the degree to which the views and perceptions of staff, external assessors, and various groups of local people and other stakeholders were, or were not, taken into account.

Findings related to impact assessment

In the end, how significant or lasting a change is, and how attributable it is to a given action, is a *matter of judgement*. This will depend particularly on the context and, of course, on who decides what is significant. It will also mean recognising that change is the outcome of multiple and complex processes as well as the struggles, ideas, and actions of differing and unequal interest groups. This suggests that simple models of cause and effect, linking project inputs to outputs and impact, although important, will usually be inadequate for assessing the impact of what

NGOs do. Rather, models are required that embrace the wider context of influences and change processes that surrounds projects and programmes, and the wide variety of the resulting impacts.

The contingent and uncertain nature of change, as well as the possibility of discontinuous or catastrophic change, puts a premium on impact monitoring, learning, and adaptation. The one thing that we can be certain about is that the unexpected will happen, and that we cannot plan for every eventuality. Any action that we take might produce dramatic and significant change that was not predicted. This puts the onus on those who intervene in processes of change to monitor the impact of what they do, on a regular basis, and adapt as a result. It is simply not good enough to say that impact cannot be measured until after a project has finished, when significant, and negative, change can occur very early in the lifetime of a project or programme. Impact assessment therefore has to be able to cope with turbulent and non-linear change as well as more gradual and linear change (Roche 1994).

Approaches to impact assessment

Broadly, three different approaches were used in the case studies. The first is mainly 'project-out' and involves clarifying and specifying project objectives and indicators and then assessing the degree to which they have been met. In some cases, this involved a careful ranking of outputs, outcomes, and impacts, with a limited number of indicators being verified at each level of the 'impact chain'. In some studies, 'control groups' or individuals outside the project areas were compared with those within project areas.

The second approach focused on the projects being assessed, but looked more broadly at the potential changes that may have occurred as a result. Typically, this involved asking various stakeholders to identify the most important changes brought about by a given project, and how they happened. In some cases, this involved using a broad checklist of potential areas or dimensions of change.

Finally, some studies adopted a more 'context-in' approach, looking first and foremost at overall changes in people's lives and then seeking to explore with them the importance of those changes and the sources of change, including the project in question. Stan Thekaekara's paper in this volume describes one of these case studies. This approach seeks to situate changes brought about by a particular project within the context of other changes.

It would seem that a combination of these approaches would be ideal, but possibly not always feasible. The tendency for impact-assessment exercises in general to focus too much on ‘project-out’ approaches can lead to results which exaggerate the importance of projects and interventions and diminish the role of other variables – not least people’s own ingenuity and agency.

On change, objectives, and indicators

Whichever approach to assessing impact was adopted, there were common areas, or dimensions of change, that were seen as significant and recurred across the case studies. These included changes in the following:

- income, expenditure, and assets, including access to land and credit;
- health, education, literacy, and other skills and knowledge;
- infrastructure, including particularly access to water and sanitation facilities;
- food security and production;
- social relations, social capital, unity, and changed community norms;
- for women in particular: ownership and control of assets; mobility; access to income-generation activities; child-care facilities; freedom to express their views; power in household decision making; household division of labour; ability to control violence;
- peace and security, law and order, declining levels of sexual violence, human-rights abuses, and destruction of lives and property;
- ability to cope with crises;
- self-confidence, self-esteem, independence, potential, and capacity to make claims and demands;
- overall quality of life.

This suggests that, although there may be important differences between people’s indicators for identifying significant change in their lives, there is perhaps a common core of dimensions, or areas, of change which are important to people, and which is not location-specific. Clearly, however, the priorities that different groups of men and women, old and young, rich and poor, assign to those changes will vary both within and between regions or locations, and over time. In addition, as the Pakistan study (Alkire and Narajo 1998) suggests, there are also important matters concerning people’s aesthetic, cultural, religious, or spiritual lives that

are touched both positively and negatively by projects and programmes, which tend to get ignored. This may mean that, for impact-assessment purposes, the search for *common* or *generic* indicators is perhaps much less important than understanding what *areas of change* are prioritised by different groups of people, and how these domains relate to each other in different contexts. In this sense, indicators become more a means of exemplifying why and how change within a particular area has occurred, and not just a means to verify a project's progress against predetermined objectives.

On tools and methods

Although many tools and methods were used in the studies, perhaps the most important conclusion about them is that the selection of a judicious mix, and sequence, of tools and methods is heavily dependent on being clear about the purpose and focus of the assessment, and designing that assessment process in a way that is appropriate to the context, the intervention in question, and the organisations involved. The ability to develop appropriate method mixes and sequences, and the ability to adapt and innovate as the study progresses, seem to be as important as the knowledge and skills required for individual methods.

Similarly, none of the tools and methods used singly solves the problem of determining attribution, and even taken together they cannot prove it. However, combining the findings produced by different methods, if properly cross-checked, can provide a body of evidence that can be agreed, disputed, or amended, which can in turn enable a reasoned and plausible judgement to be made. As Roger Riddell has argued:

In short, it is unnecessary to concentrate time, effort and resources on project or programme evaluation if firm conclusions can be drawn without using sophisticated techniques. Similarly if judgements made about qualitative aspects of projects are not substantially challenged by the relevant 'actors' or groups ... then purist worries about objectively assessing these factors become largely irrelevant. (Riddell 1990)

Social relations are a critical determinant of well-being or poverty. Addressing gender-related inequalities is seen not only as a prerequisite to 'achieving sustainable development and alleviating poverty', but a social-justice objective in its own right. It is well known that differences in gender, class, ethnicity, religion, ability/disability, and age are all

important elements which mean that communities do not have single identities, goals, or ambitions. Given these insights, and given the points already made about power and participation, processes of impact assessment need to reflect carefully on not only what needs to be assessed and how this is done, but on who is involved and what unit or level of analysis is most appropriate. It is true that, in the past few years, increasing attention has been paid to gender issues in the design, implementation, and evaluation of development projects. Several frameworks have been developed in order to assist better gender analysis in this area, notably: Practical and Strategic Needs, the Harvard Framework, the Capacities and Vulnerabilities Framework, and the Social Relations Framework (see March et al. 1999 for detailed discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of these). However, there is still a need to operationalise these frameworks in more practical ways, and in ways which can genuinely involve women and men more systematically.

Broader policy implications

The problems of attribution and aggregation

All organisations, whether they are community-based groups, local NGOs, or international agencies, need to make sense of what they are doing. They also generally want to know what difference they are making. This produces two key problems for any organisation: how to synthesise or summarise what they are doing: the aggregation problem; and how they discover the degree to which any changes they observe were brought about by their actions: the attribution problem. These issues are further complicated if the organisation has to communicate to many other people, both internally and externally, about its achievements.

In addition, impact assessment requires looking at the deep-rooted impact on those structures that embody relations of authority, power, and control and determine the degree to which individuals and groups can exercise choice. Development agencies, including large NGOs, are not immune from the problems confronting other bureaucracies in terms of complacency, hierarchy, inertia, and poor information flow. These can lead to loops of self-deception if feedback from activities is distorted, or manipulated, as individuals seek to protect themselves.

Much of the good practice that has emerged from this research and other recent work focuses on ensuring that impact-assessment processes are kept simple, relevant, and useful. But it also underlines the need to align organisational incentives, rewards, and systems so that they are

compatible with a real organisational desire to learn, and to adapt in the light of that learning. This requires a commitment from senior managers to the following measures:

- ensure coherence with other systems;
- maintain the external and 'front-line' focus of the organisation's work; and
- provide the accountability framework in which 'bottom-up' quality-control measures are properly represented and balanced along with those of other stakeholder interests.

It is vital to provide the right incentives for this basic level of information collection to be done properly – and there is no better incentive than self-interest. If impact-assessment work and subsequent improvements in quality are to happen, then this means ensuring that resources are made available and that such work is not seen as an 'add-on' or luxury, but rather as an integral part of everyone's work. This means also creating the demands and incentives for it to become central, and for these demands to be articulated in a way that conforms with organisational policies and practices. For example, reporting on the lack of gender-disaggregated data coming from projects, Goyder et al. (1998:49) state that '[o]verall the problem is not so much the lack of gender awareness by field staff and researchers, but the lack of sufficient perceived demand by higher levels within agencies like ActionAid for gender differentiated results. If this demand had been in place it could have acted as a counter influence to the pressures felt by staff to aggregate and summarise research results from multiple meetings in multiple villages.'

Many of the problems that relate to impact assessment suggest, therefore, not only the need to develop new methods that can help to deal with the problem of attribution and aggregation, but also the need to develop different organisational cultures and relationships.

Poverty and gender issues

There is limited, if tantalising, evidence which suggests that, when asked, poorer households rank collective services (health, education, water), often provided by the State, higher than NGO projects, particularly those projects that provide individualised services such as credit or agricultural extension. By contrast, better-off households rank NGO projects higher. This, if confirmed more broadly, would clearly have

important implications regarding the complementarity of NGO–State roles and, indeed, the importance of NGOs not only in helping to stimulate demand, by strengthening community organisations, but also by facilitating the supply, through lobbying for adequate funding and through support for State service provision.

As far as women’s status is concerned, the majority of case studies reported improvements in material well-being, household relations, and self-image. However, some noted that this was accompanied by further increases in workload, little change in control over assets within the home, and no change to deep-seated gender norms in issues such as dowry payments, for instance. As an OECD/DAC study on NGOs also notes ‘what is clearly proving most difficult is to introduce processes which have a more positive and systemic impact on the status of women’ (Riddell 1997).

There is also some evidence to suggest that where poorer groups and women have started to demand, and in some cases achieve, a level of systemic change, this often requires more support from intermediaries and external agencies, albeit of a nature that is different from a traditional project relationship. This has important implications for the notions of hand-over, independence, and autonomy which litter the literature on NGO organisational development. The construction of more complicated webs of relationships and support networks which are vertical (e.g. regional, national, international) as well as horizontal and can provide more flexible and rapid response seems more appropriate than one-off project relationships. If systemic change is to be achieved, this will mean bringing pressure to bear at several levels simultaneously and being able to shift the debate to those organisations, regions, or capitals where the best chance of promoting change exists.

Resource allocation

The current importance ascribed to assessing impact, as opposed to inputs and outputs, is welcome in that it stresses the importance of understanding how a positive and significant difference can be made to people’s lives. However, although past performance is a guide to future performance, it is not the only one. The relationship between projects, the organisations that run and support them, and the context in which they are situated is complex and produces a wide range of possible impacts. The same inputs at different times or in different places will produce different results. These results will in turn be different for different groups of men, women, and children.

This suggests first that an understanding of context, local power relations, poverty, and social dynamics is a necessary precondition to achieve impact. Second, the ability to listen to and learn from local people and organisations and to adapt support in the light of this learning is critical in ensuring that any past impact is likely to be sustained in the future. This in turn is dependent on organisations having a congruence between their incentives, systems, and culture that permits learning and adaptation, as well as an ability to balance the interests of various stakeholders. Fourth, the ability to innovate and take risks is also likely to be necessary, particularly if the poorest are to be included in development efforts rather than excluded from them. Investing in projects with 'safe returns' and guaranteed future impact is likely to mean sticking with the status quo.

Finally, the ability to work with others and to use and communicate the findings of impact-assessment exercises or other learning is going to be increasingly important in order to promote broader systemic change. If impact is to be increased, then this too will become a more important aspect than it has been in the past.

In short, the results of impact-assessment exercises are insufficient on their own to make sensible decisions about resource allocation to projects or organisations. Other criteria – notably, understanding of context; the ability to listen, learn, adapt, and innovate; management capacity; and the ability to work with others and to communicate learning – are also critical.

The future of NGOs: towards a virtuous circle?

This circle, like the vicious circle, also has five mutually reinforcing elements:

- increased recognition of the need to develop institutional learning and impact-assessment processes;
- the development of strategic alliances with other NGOs and other sectors, including State structures;
- a deeper engagement in processes and programmes in the NGOs' own countries of origin;
- the development of new forms of accountability; and
- the further development of professional norms and standards within and across agencies.

In order for the circle to achieve enough momentum, a number of things have to happen at the same time. The evidence from the case studies indicates that this will not only involve the development and sharing of new tools and methods of impact assessment, but also the enhancement of broader institutional learning strategies. However, for this to make a difference, the current competition for resources, personnel, and ideas between NGOs and other actors, notably the State, has to be reworked into more creative and strategic alliances. This, from an impact-assessment perspective, means less emphasis on selfishly seeking to attribute change to an individual project or organisation, and more emphasis on how agencies can combine to produce significant change for people living in poverty. This, in turn, will often mean sacrificing an individual agency's profile for the greater good. If impact assessment is to mean anything, it is about becoming more open and transparent about what is, and what is not, possible; and about what could be achieved in the future. This is not likely to happen if it simply becomes a means of blowing the organisational trumpet even harder.

One of the ways in which some of the organisations in the case studies are beginning to transform themselves is by putting down stronger and deeper roots in their own societies. For some, this has always been part of who they were; for others, including Oxfam GB and Novib, this means engaging even more in the UK and in the Netherlands respectively. It means helping to make the connections between poverty and exclusion 'at home' and elsewhere, and being committed to illustrating how the stories of change from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe are not simply about the need for further compassion and money, but are also inspiring, insightful, and creative. As these roots are put down, accountability patterns will shift too. This is important if we wish to see a future based on notions of interdependence and mutuality, rather than dependence and handouts.

Change in these elements of the circle could combine to produce a situation that could be described as follows:

- There is a more realistic portrayal of what NGOs alone can achieve, and therefore a greater degree of modesty and humility, as well as a recognition of the importance of working with others – something that will help to decrease the gap between rhetoric and reality.
- There is an increased realisation that the potential to solve problems 'at home' and 'out there' comes from bringing to bear multiple

perspectives that are based on a more effective and honest sharing of experience and ideas. It is interesting to note in this context that some recent research shows that the degree of a donor country's commitment to social justice at home is positively correlated to its commitment to social justice not only in its aid programme but in all its international relations (Olsen 1996).

- Increased trust is built on shared values and a respect for difference. In the face of globalising tendencies, one of the challenges facing the NGO community North, South, East, and West is how to overcome the danger of fragmentation and irrelevance. Alliances need to lead to more than liberal coexistence, where we agree to disagree, as this leads to isolation and fragmentation. The ultimate aim must be to create groupings in which organisations that *do* share realities based on common understanding and analysis, as well as common involvement in struggles for justice and equity, can move forward together.
- New notions of 'partnership' and change are created, based on clear and agreed standards of performance. The reaction to approaches to development that assume the acceptability of universal blueprints is to argue for the importance of context and diversity, considering processes, and understanding difference. While this is understandable, some would argue that it has led to an undermining of the notions of universal standards and rights. If everything is different and relative, then it is difficult to imagine universally applicable standards which suggest some absolute hierarchy of values (Duffield 1996).

Fifty years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was ratified, and with a current resurgence of rights-based approaches to international relations, the challenge for NGOs in general, and for impact-assessment processes in particular, remains to tell the stories of how individual men, women, and children, and their communities struggle to defend their universal rights in the face of overwhelming odds, and how they can be better supported in doing so.

Notes

1 See Roche (1999). The case studies cover four African countries (Ghana, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Uganda), three South Asian countries (Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India), one Latin American country (El Salvador), and the United Kingdom. They represent a mix of prospective work, mid-term assessments of on-going work, and retrospective reviews.

2 Recent attempts to develop standards for humanitarian work undertaken by the Sphere Project (The Sphere Project 2000), and proposals for an Ombudsman, are the exceptions.

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