

Does Matson matter? Assessing the impact of a UK neighbourhood project

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Introduction

In 1994, Mari Marcel Thekaekara and I spent some time with the Charities Advisory Trust and the Directory of Social Change to look at community work in the UK, against the background of our experience with tribal communities in India. Our report, *Across the Geographical Divide*, captured the interest of Oxfam GB, which was seeking to bring its experience of the South to bear on its UK Poverty Programme. As it happens, Oxfam and Novib were also researching impact assessment (see Chris Roche's paper in this volume). This coincided with a request to Oxfam to support the Matson Neighbourhood Project (MNP), one of whose founding directors was about to leave after eight years.

This all led to my two-month visit to Matson, a large Council-built residential estate on the edge of the city of Gloucester. While seeking to share experiences between the South and North, I aimed also to look at how what could be learned from Matson might contribute to Oxfam's research on impact assessment.

Methodology

The impact assessment was to concentrate on two things: what changes have taken place (impact)? And what brought about these changes (attribution)? The Project's own slogan – *Helping to make Matson matter* – provided an apt focus: Does Matson matter? If so, why? We decided to address these questions by the following means.

- *Talking to a cross-section of people:* This involved both formal interviews and casual conversations. When numbers were crunched, it was found that 28 ‘formal interviews’ had been conducted, of which 14 each were with men and women – the exact balance was purely coincidental! It had not been possible to interview residents who did not use the Project’s services, or staff from the statutory services. I did not keep an exact record of all the ‘casual interviews’ – book and pen not always being at hand or appropriate at the time. Attending various meetings provided the opportunity for conversations with ‘officials’, such as city and county Councillors, the local MP, social-service managers, housing officers, and the like. There were also innumerable conversations with staff, board members, and the residents who dropped in at the Project. A major way to get a feel of life in Matson was through the children. Through giving a talk on India at a local school, which I coupled with a few magic tricks, I made some good friends. Walking about the estate and hanging around the community shop, I invariably bumped into these children and got talking about India, Matson, and magic – not necessarily in that order! A questionnaire was circulated to staff, and feedback from this, and from wider discussions with the staff and board members, is incorporated here.
- *Being a part of whatever was happening:* This involved spending time at the various sites, occasionally staffing the reception area, answering the telephone (a great way to get an idea of the relationship between the Project and the residents: the fact that most of them were not only on first-name terms with the staff but were always clear about who could sort out a problem was a good indicator).
- *Sitting in on meetings:* There were various kinds of meetings: the Board and its sub-committees, review meetings of staff, meetings of City and County Council bodies, meetings of Tenants’ Associations and the Tenants’ Federation, meetings with other Neighbourhood Projects, meetings of the Matson Forum, and meetings of the Neighbourhood Project Network.
- *Going through available documentation:* I had free access to all the files, correspondence, minutes, records, statistics, and press clippings. *Matson News*, the MNP’s community newspaper, was a fascinating chronicle of growth and change. Juxtaposed with the Annual Reports, this gave a real feeling of how things had developed over the years.

So, what follows is based on reading, listening, observing, and talking about the Matson community and the MNP with people who were involved in one way or another – the stakeholders, to use a favourite Oxfam expression, or ‘participatory action research’ in development-speak – and from just ‘hanging around’, being a part of everything that was happening.

Matson: a neighbourhood community or just another Council estate?

Matson is a Council estate on the periphery of Gloucester, with the M5 motorway as one border and an artificial ski slope and country club on the hill behind. Depending on whom you ask, you get different information about Matson. The Council will tell you that it is Gloucester’s largest estate, with approximately 1500 properties, and is part of the Matson electoral ward, which has 9000 residents. Matson to them seems to be just another statistic, a problem to be managed. You ask outsiders, and their response is immediate: ‘You don’t want to go there’. Probe a little deeper, and they will tell you that it’s not safe, it’s ridden with crime, it’s run-down, vandalised, and seedy: all the conventional assumptions about a Council estate. Ask ‘Have you been there?’, and the answer is an indignant ‘Of course not!’. Talk to researchers and people who live by statistics, and they will tell you that parts of Matson have the highest indicators of economic and social stress in Gloucester, that one-third of the households are run by single parents, that 17 per cent of the households have unmet caring needs, that fewer than half the households own a car, and that more than 30 per cent of them have at least one person with serious long-term illness.

Talk to the ‘Matsonites’ – the residents and the people who work in Matson – and a different image appears. They tell you that it’s a good place to live and to work. Many of them could have moved to other Council estates but have chosen to stay. And those working in Matson are glad to work here.

So to understand Matson, we must look at its history. Various people and a lot of literature supplied a wealth of information, but one man, George Smith, who was among the first to settle in Matson in the 1950s, chronicled its history thus:

In 1945 I was in my mid-thirties. A lot of us had come out of the war to find there was an acute shortage of housing. We had to live in

single rooms, even though we had families of our own, in rooms with our parents. I myself lived for seven years with my parents.

In 1950 the government started building houses – Council estates. Matson was one of them. All of us who moved into Matson were more or less the same age, with young families. My wife did not want to come up here, but in a very short while we were a community. There were a lot of children around, everyone knew each other, and there was a strong community spirit. She loved it in no time.

All of us were employed – there were a lot of engineering works close by that provided employment ... I worked at the Gloucester Wagon Works. I used to cycle into work and back, like a lot of the others. Right through the sixties and seventies, life here was good. But in the late seventies and early eighties, things started to go wrong. You don't notice it at first. Workers' unions seemed to be a bad word, and there seemed to be an effort to destroy the unions. Businesses started closing down. I retired in 1981, and two years later the Gloucester Wagon Works closed and over 1500 people were left without jobs and most of them were from Matson ...

This was when the deterioration started. People started moving out, and the community began to break up. More and more properties began to fall vacant, especially the flats.

On top of the unemployment, we felt that we were being used as a dumping ground by the Council. They started moving people out of bed and breakfast into the vacant properties. These were mainly people and families who already had a lot of problems. Many of them were single, with no family support at all. And it seemed as if they were being pushed here out of sight. They were put here and forgotten. Over a period of time, crime evolved into being commonplace. I don't want to be judgmental, but I am sure for many people plain survival was an issue. This was not something that was particular to Matson or even Gloucester. It was happening all over the country.

I don't want to be political, but it was a Tory-dominated Council and they clearly made us feel we were something they didn't want to know about. Things came to a head when the Council came up with the proposal to sell all the Council estates to a private association – the North Housing. We were unhappy with this. We had not been consulted and we definitely did not want the houses sold off.

This was a turning point. The Tenants' Associations decided to do something about it. We got a lot of support from the Gloucester Law Centre ... Matson took the lead, and all the other Council estates joined in ... We protested. We started bringing back our sense of community. I did not enjoy why we had to do it, but I enjoyed doing it.

We won. The Council decided not to sell off the houses. This gave us a lot of confidence that if we can get together we can get results. But after the campaign the enthusiasm started wearing off. Once the housing business was sorted out, the Tenants' Associations' job seemed to be done, though it wasn't. So a group of us started thinking about the community ... I don't remember how exactly the idea for the Neighbourhood Project came up ... Six of us started in the disused community centre. At first it was difficult to get people involved. But then all the three churches in Matson got involved. We had no idea what exactly to do, but took Mark Gale on as the Project Director. And slowly we began to grow. People began to take notice. A little bit of the community spirit started coming back. This is what we are fighting for even now. Can we really bring it back? I think so – because without a sense of community, nothing works.

We have been successful to a degree. Lots more needs to be done – it is an on-going thing. Crime has definitely come down. The Project can't claim full credit, but it has definitely contributed. It has given people something to work for – a name to live by. It has supplied people with options. My major concern at the moment is that the only people who seem to be talking about the community are from my age group. It is difficult to get young people involved. Probably because of their other problems, especially unemployment. It's a question of trying to survive. All of us older people are now on the sidelines, because we've been through it. They are the future.

The world has become a difficult place. The concerns are at a higher level, and the lower levels are forgotten. I believe different levels in society are inevitable, but we need tolerance and compassion. I can tolerate the rich if they don't stand on your head and push you down. We need a compassionate society. People need opportunities. But I am optimistic. Yes, things are definitely getting better. Not as fast as we would like it to. But we are on the up and up.

This account of Matson's downhill slide was clearly seen as part of something that was happening all over the UK. What is of interest, however, is what made the people of Matson control the slide. Many factors contributed to this, and the MNP very obviously occupies the pride of place.

The Matson Neighbourhood Project

The history of the Matson Neighbourhood Project is inextricably linked to the history of two campaigning organisations – the Gloucester Law Centre and the Gloucester Tenants' Federation – plus factors such as the nationwide response to the government White Paper on Locality Planning.

The Gloucester Law Centre was set up in the mid-1980s 'to provide much-needed free legal advice on welfare benefits, housing and employment matters'. One of its important roles was providing support to various Tenants' Associations dotted around the city. In 1987, the Centre stumbled on news of a secret move by the Council to sell off its 6500-odd houses to a private Newcastle-based company, North Housing. The Centre's staff were quick to inform the Tenants' Associations – their clients. In June 1988, Association representatives formed the Gloucester Tenants' Federation and launched what was to be a long and bitter campaign against the sell-off.

The Law Centre soon faced the threat of total closure, with the City Council citing its support for the Tenants' Federation 'political' campaign as outside its remit. A protracted battle culminated in victory for both the Centre and the Federation, demonstrating what communities could achieve if organised and united. The campaigns laid the foundation for people taking more positive action to determine what happened to their lives and their neighbourhood. Many of the individuals involved were also central to setting up the Matson Neighbourhood Project.

The Project began quietly in 1990 in a derelict church-owned building which had once been a youth club. Matson, by all accounts, was sliding downhill faster than skiers on the artificial ski slope behind it. With a majority of people on social-security benefits, the most important need was for an Advice Centre. And so the Project opened its doors with an Advice Centre and it has not looked back since. Today it offers a wide range of services, including advice and representation, special-needs services, jobs, training and education, and community and economic development. For instance, in 1996-97 there were more than 3000

enquiries, plus 1000 home visits, and an extra £250,000 was drawn into the local economy through new benefit claims; 65 residents who were recovering from mental ill health and five with learning disabilities attended a drop-in centre, and 100 people attended in response to medical referrals. Unemployment fell by 38 per cent, with the creation of 200 training and education places and 120 job placements. In addition, there were parents' support groups, lunch clubs for pensioners, a clothes-recycling service, and so on, all run from various reclaimed sites. The annual budget for 1997-98 was approximately £240,000; it came primarily from local-authority contracts and grants, charitable trusts, and businesses.

While these activities are not so very unique, what sets them apart is the process by which they were started. I shall not, therefore, describe the Centre's activities in detail, concentrating rather on the process and its impact. In terms of staffing, something that characterises the Project is that board members are not appointed. Instead, the MNP was set up as a limited company, with membership open to all residents to join an elected board, most of the member of which are residents. There are 26 paid staff (18 of them part-time) and 14 regular volunteers. Half of these people are residents. Staff are divided into four units, each of which is co-ordinated by a team leader, which allows everyone very easy access to anybody at any level.

Assessing impact

For years, projects all over the world have been engaged in the business of poverty alleviation or eradication. Most of the more successful ones have monitored and evaluated their work quite closely, but not many have assessed the *impact* of their work. While monitoring and evaluation normally track a project's tasks, activities, or programmes, impact assessment looks at their *effect*. Are they really making a difference? Are they effecting a change? Even successful programmes and activities do not always have the desired impact and they may even have an unforeseen or unintended impact on the community. It is hoped that by understanding the impact of their work, projects will become more effective.

Before assessing the impact of the MNP, we need to consider the impact of poverty itself. The corollary of its slogan would be that at some point Matson *did not* matter. Why? Was it just because of poverty? Surely not, for there are so many other communities in the UK and

elsewhere where the poverty is much worse. If we look at the problem solely from an economic point of view, we get into all kinds of arguments about relative poverty and whether it is even necessary to work in a place like Matson – especially when there is a shortage of resources. But if we look at what poverty does to people and communities from a social and political perspective, we find that the impact or effect of poverty remains the same, irrespective of its degree.

Poverty is not just about a shortage or a lack of money. Nor just about meeting basic needs. No doubt these are the glaring symptoms of poverty. But if we see poverty purely in its economic context, we run the risk of overlooking what it does to people and communities. For instance, when I look at Matson or even the much worse-off parts of the UK, I cannot for a moment compare their situation with that of the communities with whom I work in India. The physical environment of those who are considered poor in the UK would actually compare well with our middle class. However, when we look at the social, psychological, and political *impact* on those living in poverty, we will find that there is not much difference between what happens to people in the UK and anywhere else in the world. The UK Coalition Against Poverty says that '[p]overty is about exclusion. Exclusion from society, and exclusion from decision making at every level.' It has to do with the feeling of powerlessness and the resulting sense of fear and entrapment, with loss of hope, discrimination, and the denial of human rights. A sense that nobody cares. And it is obvious that all these feelings were present in Matson. To use a phrase I often heard: '*They* don't want to know'. This neatly sums up what it is all about. '*They*' – the powers that be – did not care about Matson, Matson did not matter to '*them*'. Although it may not be an explicit objective, I imagine that the underlying purpose of the MNP and all its work would be to make Matson matter not only to the residents, but also to '*them*'.

So, in trying to assess its impact, I have asked myself: does Matson (now) matter? What has been the role of the Project in making it matter? Thus, my favourite questions were: *What are the changes that have taken place in Matson? Has the quality of life improved or not over the years? And of course the inevitable: What do you think caused it?*

Does Matson matter? And has anything changed?

It was almost universally acknowledged that change – for the better – had taken place.

Refurbishments to the houses

This was almost always the first response from people when asked about the changes. While there was dissatisfaction about the fact that only a few properties along the main road had been improved, people agreed that this had given a 'lift' to the estate. Those who lived in older properties now at least had some hope. Someone described this as a 'not yet' feeling, instead of the 'never' feeling that existed before. Once houses were done up, they tended to be looked after. There is no denying the impact that an improvement in the living environment has on self-esteem: *'Started this garden only after they did the houses up. Everything was too grey and dirty before that. And it wasn't no use – some of the kids would be sure to destroy it. Now I'm looking for the snowdrops'*, said an elderly woman tending her garden during an unusually warm February.

Crime and vandalism

'If you could have seen the place ...' said one resident. The sentence was eloquently left unfinished. Now, the condition of the pillar boxes, telephone kiosks, and bus shelters was in itself testimony that the level of vandalism at Matson was nothing, compared with that of other Council estates. The local headmaster graphically described the state of the school premises when he arrived 20 years ago: fences pulled down, walls defaced with graffiti, litter all around. Robinswood School today is a far cry from that.

One woman says that she would be much less afraid of walking around Matson at night than in many other neighbourhoods. The librarian commented: *'We had a lot of trouble with vandalism and even had a security guard. But for the last five years the library has not been vandalised – no more graffiti.'* (She was quick to touch wood after saying that.)

Getting rid of the blatant drug dealing was seen by many as a major triumph against crime. While it was difficult to pinpoint how exactly this was done, there had been close co-operation between the community and the police. People had had enough, and rather than turn a blind eye they began to report problems if they suspected that drug dealing was going on. Police were quick to act, and that spurred more people to report things. But nearly everyone added that this did not mean that there was no crime and vandalism or drugs. There was still plenty around, but nowhere near what it used to be. As one woman said: *'... it's not like before – when the vans would be here with dark windows and loud music. Everybody knew what was going on. But you don't see them any more.'*

If they turned up, I'm sure somebody would be quick to report it. Project documents recorded a 24 per cent drop in domestic burglaries between 1994 and 1996. The attempt to obtain figures from the Council regarding crime rates and other statistics is another story in itself. Suffice it to say at this point that they were not successful.

More significant still was the change in attitude towards crime. I witnessed a phone call to report that some children had vandalised a bus shelter: the MNP was the first port of call, and not the police. Even more interesting was the staff person's reply: she had recognised the kids from the description and said simply, *'Leave it with me. I'll be seeing them tonight'*. And then added to me, *'It's half term, school's out, and the Redwell Centre (a local youth centre) is closed. They're not bad kids, just bored kids. We can sort them out.'* This quiet confidence in being able to deal immediately with what is normally seen as a major social problem – vandalism by teenagers – was an impressive indicator of how people had taken control over the neighbourhood. So it is not just that crime has come down: people no longer feel helpless about it; they are concerned, and willing to voice and act on their concern.

More services on the 'patch'

This was another favourite. People were quick to point out how there was a time when 'there was nothing here – not a thing', and you had to go into town for everything. Under a 1993 front-page banner headline 'UNDER SIEGE' in the local newspaper was a description of the terrible decline in Matson. A 'Matson Factfile' box said: 'In recent weeks a co-op store, chip shop and hairdresser have closed. There is a threat to nursery classes at the local infants' school.' In 1998, just five years later, a resident told me, *'It's all here, you don't have to go to town. There's a post office, a grocery, cake shop, two chemist stores, shops, doctor's surgery and all the other things the Project has. We even have a local housing office.'* One woman at a sheltered-housing project for the elderly was in no doubt that having the surgery and the chemist in Matson greatly helped most of the residents, who would otherwise have to take a bus into town to see a doctor or get a prescription filled out – a near-impossible task for many. That the chemist would come by and deliver the medicines made all the difference.

Wanting to stay in Matson

There was a time when no one wanted to stay in Matson, and many of the houses were empty. This is not so now. The fact that there are some 30 houses vacant, I was told, has nothing to do with people not wanting accommodation, but with the way in which houses are allotted by the Council. I was told there was a waiting list for these houses, surely another area where figures from the Council would corroborate – or disprove – people's views.

A better image

Something that angers most residents is the way in which others perceive them. According to the UK Coalition Against Poverty:

Poverty is not a word people like to be associated with. There are too many myths about the poor – that they are lazy and unfit, or helpless and pitiful. The stereotypes are all negative. Poverty is maintained in part through the myths and stereotypes which blame and shame people in poverty ... Over-blaming crushes people's spirit and confidence.

But this seems to be changing. Many people talked about the fact that the image of Matson had got a 'lift', both among the residents and outside. The 1993 article in the local newspaper had described Matson as 'besieged – by poverty, unemployment and deprivation'. In February 1998, an MP stood up in parliament and referred to Matson as a 'model'.

The positive press coverage about Matson has not been lost on the residents. Because a lot of problems stem from preconceived ideas, myths, and attitudes, challenging these prejudices is often one of the early steps in a long process of change. The improved self-image has given people confidence that they can change things and influence decision makers. This confidence in dealing with the external world has translated into a reduction in apathy. For example, a call to protest against proposed cuts in grants to community projects in early 1997 saw two coachloads of angry residents gather at the City Council offices. '*Hands off our services*' was clearly the message.

Strong sense of community

Underlying all these changes is a predominant sense of community. George Smith felt that this spirit was actually much stronger when

Matson was a thriving community of young families, with plenty of children and a lot of activity. But as the industries started closing down, many started moving away, leaving houses vacant: a convenient dumping ground for the Council. However, beginning with the campaign against selling the houses, the sense of community returned. '*But you can't take it for granted - you've got to work on it*', he said.

It is not only the residents who experience this sense of community. A lot of the professionals and other service providers who work in Matson spoke of it almost enviously. Many of them talked about what I call the 'smile factor'. Run a 'smile test': smile at strangers and see how many smile back. I was never disappointed. I am willing to admit, though, that my magic tricks at the school may have had something to do with it!

But not everyone was enthusiastic. While conceding that 'some' change had taken place, a few indicated that they would prefer to leave. I tried to come to terms with this divide. At first I thought it was to do with the 'old' and the 'new' residents. But some old residents also did not feel so good about Matson, while some of the new ones did. A closer look seemed to indicate that it had more to do with their involvement with the community and its problems. Among those who were involved in the initial campaign, there seems to be a feeling of '*we did it*': a sense of ownership over the process that turned Matson around, that gave it 'more outlook', as one resident put it.

What made Matson matter?

Attribution

This is an aspect of any impact assessment or evaluation where feathers tend to get ruffled. Everyone would like to claim credit and have their role recognised as being pivotal in the causes that effected change. My experience in Matson confirmed this. For the community, attribution was not so much of an issue. While everybody was quick to point out the changes that had taken place, people were very slow to commit themselves when asked what had brought these about. Various actors and contributory factors were identified, but everybody found it difficult to attribute the causes to any one of them. For example, the refurbishment of houses: some attributed it directly to the Council who pumped the money in, some to the better image and increased bargaining power that Matson now had with the Council, and some to the MNP, while others said that it was due to the Tenants' Associations. Perhaps the truth lies in all of these, because each clearly did have a role to play.

Local people were clear that various players contributed to the changes that have come about. That each of them played different roles, served different purposes, and met different needs was plainly accepted. Thus, it was not an issue of competition for plaudits, but a recognition of the intrinsically complementary nature of working towards change.

The roles of various actors

A range of actors was identified as having contributed significantly.

The City Council and County Council

The community perception of the role of the City Council and County Council and other statutory agencies has been ambivalent. From being seen as a heartless landlord in the late 1980s, the City Council regained some favour, primarily because of the refurbishments. That it provides substantial support to the MNP and other services is also a factor. Nonetheless, the Council represents 'power' and 'resource wealth', and that does not sit well with people who are by and large powerless and resource-dependent. But at the time of the assessment visit, relations between the community and the Council were reasonably good.

Part of this appeared to derive from the Council's acceptance of the importance of the voluntary sector and Neighbourhood Projects in general. This seems to have been reflected in the budget provisions. For example, Council staff seem more than willing to co-operate with the voluntary sector, not least because they seem to recognise that it fills up the gaping holes within the system. But there is no indication that the statutory agencies see the voluntary sector and communities as creative forces with whom they can work to bring about a sustainable social system. They tend to see the voluntary sector at best as allies to get a job done, and at worst as thorns in their side that they even have to pay for! Communities are 'customers' and 'clients' who must be satisfied – and if the voluntary sector can help, so be it. Any role for the community beyond that seems to be outside the scope and grasp of the system. All the stereotypical negative images of people in poverty are often enshrined in official attitudes and responses to the community.

A case in point: the acute shortage of foster carers came up for discussion at Matson. The Project quickly took on three part-time workers, who managed to recruit 32 possible carers. Training schedules were negotiated to match the availability of these workers. But on the crucial day when the trainers were to have an introductory meeting with

the would-be carers, none of the carefully negotiated schedules had been given a second thought. The trainers had only 'one window' available, and that was for five consecutive full days! They had presumed that people living in Council estates must be poor, that poor people must be unemployed, and that unemployed people must be free to attend all-day courses for five days. Credit must go to the staff of the Project and from social services that they re-negotiated a compromise, although they lost some of the potential carers.

The Tenants' Associations

The Tenants' Associations are powerful representatives of the community in all their dealings with the Council, and they are recognised as partners in the management of Council properties. They have won a legitimate place within the system: an inside ring seat. The potential to play a vital role in protecting the interests of the tenants is inherent in this hard-won position. But so is the danger of co-option. A lot rests with the leaders to ensure that they do not end up representing the Council to the tenants, rather than the other way round.

The churches

While one does not sense that the people of Matson are especially religious, one can nonetheless feel the tremendous respect that the people have for the three churches in Matson, especially for their work with young people, and their unstinted support to all the community initiatives.

The other service providers

The number of service providers in Matson is one of the major sources of pride and comfort to the community. People who are especially vulnerable appreciate these services most, and their very presence makes the entire estate appear relatively vibrant and active. All the shops are open and full. Schools are well attended, and the doctor's surgery and the chemist are kept more than busy. That people see the increased provision of services as a measure of progress is in itself an indication of the importance of their role within the community.

The funders

While people were aware that charitable trusts and big businesses provided financial support to community initiatives, there did not seem to be sufficient interaction between them to warrant strong opinions one way or the other. The importance of financial and sometimes technical support to the Project cannot be diminished. However, donors and projects often make the critical mistake of believing that poverty is caused by a lack of resources or the improper management of these resources. The critical ingredient required for change is overlooked: a community organised and willing to tackle the systemic and structural causes of poverty. As Nadine Gordimer has said, 'The new century is not going to be new at all if we offer only charity, that palliative to satisfy the conscience and keep the same old system of haves and have-nots quietly contained.'

Funders tend to see themselves as supporting projects rather than enabling a process of change, so funding is piecemeal, insecure, and completely focused on specific measurable outputs: the number of children attending an after-school project, or the number of elderly people using the day-care centre, or the number of people who have walked through the doors of the project. This has obvious impacts on any project. First, it obliges it to spend a lot of time chasing funding, and invariably this makes great demands on project managers. The time spent on fundraising by the MNP Director in the two months that I was there was simply astounding, and frustrating for him and the staff. Indeed, more than half of the senior managers' time was taken up with this, and more if one included the time spent on retaining funders. Second, the insecurity of short-term funding does not allow a project the scope for long-term planning, although change is not just about achieving immediate targets.

Finally, even the best projects often fall into the trap of counting heads and so lose their ability to see what is happening around them: to be proactive in their plans and strategies, by being sensitive to local needs, to be able to see threats and opportunities with equal alacrity, and to see not just the trees, but also the woods. This last factor is a direct result of how donors, projects, and often communities themselves evaluate impact.

The Project

Various programmes and activities of the MNP were identified as being either directly responsible for or contributing to the changes that have

taken place. There were no major differences between the perceptions of the staff and those of the community, beyond a question of emphasis. Most people saw the Project as having been a catalyst, and this was regarded as its greatest strength. Hence in the next section we consider the strengths and weaknesses of the Project in fulfilling this role.

Strengths of the Matson Neighbourhood Project

The Project had listened before acting. In general, project activities tend to stem from the individual skills of the initiators, and often also from predetermined responses to predetermined needs. Not so common is what has happened at Matson, where the activities are designed in response to needs identified by the community. A lot of effort went into trying to find out what were the community's unmet needs.

The Project's role has been to identify the resources – human and material – to meet these needs. For example, when large numbers of people were found to have unmet health-care needs, primarily due to a lack of mobility, the Project's inability to provide for this itself did not deter staff from looking for a solution – and that was to go back to the community, get a list of the doctors who were most consulted, and then contact those doctors and see which of them could be convinced to set up surgeries in Matson. The result: a doctor's surgery 'on the patch', a highly treasured service.

The Project *put the community first* and so became one of its focal points, something that everyone could turn to. There was a strong feeling among the residents that there was nothing that was outside the realm of the MNP, if it concerned or mattered to them. This determines the kind of relationship that the Project has with the community. The relationship goes beyond that of a provider and customer: it is one of two equal partners whose fortunes are inextricably woven together. In the words of the Deputy Director of the MMP:

We've built up some really firm friendships. It would be so easy to take up everyone's problems and solve them, but what we're really about is empowering people to do that themselves. Having said that, though, we have to accept that there are people who will never cope, and that's where we come in. *I hope we meet people as friends, not as clients.* If someone's threatened with eviction, they know there are people around who will support them. (emphasis mine)

This approach ensured that, no matter what it does, the Project will tend automatically to involve the community - almost as a reflex response. How different from those projects where managers have to remind themselves to 'consult' the community.

This also results in a respect for and sensitivity to the problems and realities faced by local people, which again determines the way in which the MNP interacts with the community. To take two examples: in a supposedly high-crime area I was surprised to find that the Project's One Stop Shop does not pull down heavy steel shutters at night, in spite of valuable computers and other things within. Instead, a fragile wall of glass forms the shop front, completely covered with decorations in the form of job advertisements, painstakingly stuck on every day by the workers and volunteers. When I asked them about running such a risk, their reply was: '*All the kids hang out here at night. They hardly come by during the day. If we want them to see the jobs, then night it is.*' What they did not say is how people react to this kind of concern that is coupled with trust.

When people spoke of the achievements of the Project, it was with a sense of pride. This speaks highly of *community ownership* and is clearly a direct result of the strong focus on community. The community is not incidental - not just 'the beneficiaries', 'the clients', 'the customers', 'the end-users': they *are* the Project - an integral part of its structure and its functioning. This is reflected both in the way in which the Project implements its programmes and activities, and how it is structured. The high number of residents who are involved as volunteers, staff, and board members physically places the community at its core. When asked whether people would fight to keep the Project if it were threatened, the answer I got was: '*Well, we've always done it, haven't we? We fought to keep the houses, we fought to keep the chemist, we fought to keep the library - sure we'll fight to keep the Project.*'

Another strength was that the Project had helped to *raise the profile of Matson*. The way in which it has drawn funding into the area and got a lot of people interested was seen as directly contributing to changing the image of Matson, both within the community and outside. The Project has also *supported other service providers*, like the school or the library, to make them more effective; and it has played a *catalytic role* in bringing the various services together and keeping them on the patch. The MNP took the lead in creating a forum where all the various development actors and service providers in Matson could exchange notes. This included representatives from statutory services, such as school

representatives, police officers, housing officers, etc., who meet once a month and share their experiences – the Matson Forum. If someone faces a problem in a particular area, someone else offers to help. For example, if someone is worried about a bunch of kids regularly hanging around at night, the youth worker immediately offers to look into it. The Matson Forum is an example of the synergetic effect (I understood its meaning only when I saw the Forum at work) created through the initiative of the Project.

The MNP is clearly seen as representing the community, both as individuals and collectively. For example, when someone needs to sort out a rent problem, he or she invariably first turns to the Project and is often accompanied by a staff member to the housing office. Similarly, if someone is applying for a job. ‘Hand holding’, one person called it. In so doing, the Project has placed the collective Matson community and the concept of Neighbourhood Projects on the official agenda. The role played by the Project in providing support and guidance to set up similar initiatives was seen as a matter of pride – almost a justification in itself for its existence. Indeed, all the Neighbourhood Projects of the county have formed themselves into a Network of Neighbourhood Projects.

An important strength has been the *leadership*: not just at the level of a charismatic director, but also at lower levels. In today’s era of ‘professionalism’ in the voluntary sector, this kind of leadership has been criticised. There has been a tendency to believe that managerial skills can replace leadership skills. But it is not an either/or issue. The dynamics of social change are complex, and the different dimensions require different skills and abilities.

Recently, however, economic development has come to exert an overriding influence on the objectives, programmes, and activities of the voluntary sector. As a result, change is viewed as a management exercise: management of resources, both human and material, with inputs and outputs all being measured so that we can ‘quantify’ the change. Considering that fairly large capital resources are at stake, this is understandable. However, its influence seems to have been so overbearing that it has overshadowed, if not excluded, the social and political dimensions of the change process. The language of the market dominates, and charismatic leaders are re-classified as ‘social entrepreneurs’.

Weaknesses and threats to the Matson Neighbourhood Project

It was not very easy to find critics of the Project, but a few objections did emerge. First, while everybody at the MNP is aware of the immediate goals and overall objectives of their teams, there does not seem to be a clear definition of the strategic objectives. Thus, while the various teams work closely together, there does not appear to be any strategic reason why they should stay together as one organisation. What unites them seems to be funding, the management board, and to some extent strong leadership. There is the danger that more successful units could drift to become independent. While there may be nothing wrong in this in itself, it might lead to the community's losing control. The history of this Project bears this out, for the community did lose ownership of one of the few economically successful projects (furniture recycling).

An in-depth analysis and understanding of the root causes of poverty would greatly contribute to evolving a more strategic role. While the MNP has had a huge impact on the changes that have taken place in Matson, it has not affected the local economy to the degree where we can safely assume that this change is irreversible. Matson still occupies the same place in the economic structure: very close to the bottom, with most people living on social-security benefits. This is not to detract from the success of getting people back into work. But they are still looking outside Matson for work. And we must recognise that part of the success is related to the improvement in the overall external economy.

No strategic moves are being made to create work in Matson, to make it a vibrant economy. On the other hand, perhaps without realising it and without intending to, the Project has contributed to the economy by bringing in a lot more jobs into the area. But is this sustainable, and is it enough? The Matson Project is almost completely dependent on external aid. At present its success attracts funding. But in my own experience, this very success will sooner or later turn away funders, because most like to look for 'the really needy'. If funds were cut or were to dwindle significantly, a lot of the changes could be reversed.

Lessons learned

It was with some trepidation that I embarked on this impact assessment, especially when confronted with all the literature on the subject. But since the terms of reference were completely open-ended – the

Project and I could evolve the methodology as we went along – the task was not as intimidating as it could have been. In fact, it was exciting and refreshing, because rather than trying to fit the Project into a pre-determined framework or methodology, so much was learned from just ‘being around’. There was a sense of discovery, as much of the learning was the result of chance encounters. Too often in our concern for results — ‘outputs’ — the path is so well charted beforehand that there is hardly the space or opportunity for these encounters. It takes courage on all sides to be so open-ended – which is possible only if all those involved trust each other. And that was perhaps one of the most significant elements of the whole exercise: trust. This shaped and determined the direction taken by the exercise, and also produced some very interesting insights on the whole issue of impact assessment itself.

Holistic assessment

Often assessments occur at the behest of a donor. This is because the (unstated) purpose of most assessments is to provide evidence to a donor agency, and they in turn to their respective donors, that the money has been well spent. In a project that has multiple donors – as most projects do – one can imagine what happens. Such an approach is not only going to result in a fragmented and lopsided view of the change process, but it is also likely to result in confusion and competition on the issue of attribution. Such competition can affect the various teams within a given project. For example, if we were to assess the work of the One Stop Shop in order to convince the NatWest Bank, the donor, of its wonderful achievements, there is always the danger of overlooking the contribution of the Advice Team which possibly played a significant part in motivating people to look for jobs. It all leads to a lot of friction within the organisation, because the more obvious and visible activities tend to get the credit.

This fragmented and negative approach to assessment is even more evident in the way that the statutory services work, as each service finds it impossible to look beyond the tops of its filing cabinets. For example, a reduction in crime was claimed as one of the primary changes that had taken place. The police can claim that this is because of their excellent service. Some residents think that it has more to do with the refurbishment of the houses and the sense of community created by the MNP. The Youth Worker from the Baptist Church, or from Social Services, may also have contributed. In a desperate bid to justify their existence,

this competition between services may result in services pitting themselves against each other. If one talks to the people themselves, one realises that the truth is that all these services, perhaps along with other factors like a general improvement in the economy have, *together*, contributed to the reduction in crime.

This does not detract from the need to monitor or evaluate the functioning of each service or sector. But let us not confuse monitoring and evaluation with impact assessment, or efficiency with effectiveness. Donors above all need to understand this: that the pounds and pennies can be counted and accounted for, but to stop there does not give us an understanding of the impact of the intervention. At the same time, to try to understand impact only through one particular intervention does not give us the whole picture either. To assess impact, we have to take a holistic approach that presupposes a complementarity between the various actors involved.

The community as the starting point

In a more traditional approach, predetermined impact-indicators are the usual starting point. In a carefully planned and well-managed project, one would expect that these indicators had been defined from the outset by the project itself. In the absence of such specified indicators, an impact-assessment team would draw up indicators with project personnel and then set about measuring impact against the chosen indicators. One way or the other, the starting point is invariably a clearly defined set of impact indicators. (Never mind all the midnight oil burned in differentiating between output and outcome and impact indicators, let alone the debate about the need for universal indicators!)

So it is pretty inevitable that any review or assessment will tend to focus on predetermined targets and quantifiable indicators against which they can be measured. In so doing, the role of the community becomes minimal as project records, survey data, figures, calculators, and computers occupy centre stage. Review teams of 'experts' are set up, and in the optimum scenario the community is 'consulted' to corroborate their findings.

However, if change is seen essentially as a political process, which must have implications for the economic life and other aspects of the community, then the starting point of assessing change has to be the community itself. How do they perceive themselves and their lives? With the Matson Neighbourhood Project, the absence of predefined

indicators, coupled with an open-ended approach, allowed us to evolve a methodology in which the community was the starting point. The fact that the MNP had such a strong focus on community — not just as end-users of the services but as the protagonists in the entire development drama — left us with no doubt that the methodology for the case study would have to be community-focused, in keeping with the approach and entire culture of the Project. A community's change process is not just a management exercise: it is a part of their daily struggle, and for most poor communities it is very often the purpose of their lives. They *experience* the impact of any intervention on a daily basis, whether or not they articulate it. To quote Nadine Gordimer once more: 'How do victims themselves perceive their poverty? They live it; they know it best, beyond all outside concepts.'

NGOs need to recognise this and not presume that they are the beginning and the end of a change process. The starting point of an assessment should be to provide the forums in which (or the means by which) the community's experiences and perceptions can be articulated. Statistics can then be the add-ons to corroborate and cross-check primary evidence. A difference between community perception and figures should lead us to re-question the community's perception as well as the validity of the figures. Which brings us to another lesson learned.

The role of numbers

One cannot deny that it is important to track specific interventions, to monitor and build up a base of figures, all of which will form an essential part of any review or assessment exercise. The issue is not whether or not figures are needed, but rather the role that they play. Will they be the focal point on which the assessment is based, or will they be used instead to underscore, corroborate, or challenge the perceptions and experiences of the community, the project staff, and all the other actors involved in the change process? It is very rare to find the perceptions of the community occupying the pride of place in any review or assessment. At best they are appended to underscore a point made by a table of figures — whereas in fact it should be the other way around.

Obviously, in this impact assessment we opted for numbers to be used in this way — confident that, since we had the co-operation of the Head of Planning of the Gloucestershire County Council, obtaining the figures would be easy. The reality was somewhat different. In spite of recruiting a person who would collect the figures, we did not succeed in getting data

that would be at all meaningful to this exercise. Not that it was impossible, but it could not be done in the time available and it would have required more effort than we were able to put in. For example, there were at least two sets of figures that we thought would have a direct bearing in terms of corroborating people's perceptions of two of the major changes that had taken place. One concerned crime, and the other related to whether people wanted to stay in Matson. If we could have obtained the statistics related to crime over the last few years, it should have been possible to see whether there had actually been a drop in the incidence of crime to the extent perceived by the community. However, when we attempted to collect these figures, apart from the red tape encountered, we were given to understand that they were not recorded in a way that could be easily extracted for a comparative study of the incidence of crime over the years, which makes one wonder what anyone does with all the figures in the first place. Hoping to correlate these figures with other events and happenings on the estate, like the refurbishment of the houses, and to analyse possible factors that could contribute to the reduction of crime, was obviously hoping for too much.

If this was too much, we thought that at least an analysis of the second set of figures, namely the turnaround in the occupancy of the properties, would give us an idea of whether the statistics corroborated the local perception that now more people wanted to stay on the estate. But we found at the Housing Office that the methodology for collecting the figures had been changed so often that no meaningful comparative study could be done. Perhaps if we had put in a lot more effort to extract these figures, we may have succeeded – but at what cost?

The point I wish to make, however, is that, lacking a holistic approach, each department had gone about collecting the figures in its own way. There was no indication that any of these figures had been analysed, either within the department or in conjunction with other departments, to understand what worked and what did not. The bottom line was clearly the pounds and the pennies: if the sums of money tallied, that was all that seemed to matter. At the end of the day, none of the figures would help us to understand either the change that had taken place or the causes for this change.

A more holistic approach to social services would not only affect the kinds of figures collected by each of the departments but would also affect the use to which these figures would be put, and would perhaps contribute to more effective planning, leading in turn to more sustainable and lasting change. To take another example: health and disability

link-workers across the different Neighbourhood Projects all identified breathing difficulties as being the most common physical ailment. This was borne out by the pharmacist, who clearly indicated that damp could be one of the contributing factors. Comparing the incidence of breathing problems among people living in refurbished houses and those in the older and damper houses would give us a clearer picture of cause and effect – leading to a better allocation of resources. Such an approach, however, presupposes a certain element of trust on the part of all the players – something that is difficult to foster in the highly competitive scramble for resources.

Conclusion

What did we learn from this experience? The feedback from the staff, board members, and members of the community was that the exercise helped everyone to stop and take a critical look at what was happening and that it may well shape future plans. What did it take? Just someone to create the opportunity for a lot of people to articulate what they feel, what they know, what they have experienced. Simply, it meant listening to the community.

Nobody viewed the exercise as if there was going to be an expert from the outside doing an impact assessment of a project about which he had known nothing a couple of months before. All of those involved had seen it more as a process of listening to what everybody had to say and pulling this all together, with the hope that it would trigger off some critical thinking about the role and impact of the Project.

Of the elements that contributed to make this listening effective, the most critical was the fact that the key people involved in the Project themselves wanted to go through such an exercise. This created such an atmosphere of trust that even I was surprised how willing everyone was to allow me to be privy to some of the Project's innermost deliberations. There was no meeting that I was not invited to attend, and there was not the slightest hint of defensiveness. I can only ascribe this to the facts that, first, the MNP firmly believes in itself; second, there is genuine willingness and openness to learn and improve; and third, that this is because the Project is community-driven.

As managers of large resources and large organisations, NGOs all over the world have been caught up in evolving complex 'scientific' methods to enable them to be accountable to their donors. How much have these methods contributed to being accountable to the community? Unless we

recognise the social and political dimensions of change and development, we will continue groping for elusive assurance that we are on the right track.

At the end of the visit there was not the slightest shadow of doubt in my mind that Matson *did* matter. And that, among a host of other factors, the Matson Neighbourhood Project has played a critical and vital role. And if you were to ask me how I know this, I must tell you very simply 'because the community told me so!'

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