Two approaches to evaluating the outcomes of development projects

Marion Meyer and Naresh Singh

Development strategies and theories have evolved over the past 50 years in response to lessons learned and changing circumstances. While there are many schools of thought on the issue, two main trends have emerged in practice. The first is where 'development' starts with the outsider providing some good or service (most likely a good) which a community may or may not need. This, known as the 'top–down approach', still occurs. But as people resented being treated as objects, and 'development' projects failed to achieve their goals, the emphasis moved towards the so-called 'people-centred' approach, or 'bottom–up' development. This concentrates on the needs of people, what *they* want and need. *They* define the goals of development and participate in development 'projects' from the beginning (Goulet, 1995).

The key is participation. However, the degree of participation varies. Some development projects involve an outsider coming in with an agenda and then harnessing the community's knowledge, people, and so on, in that research. Other projects involve an outsider offering services to a community, which sets the research agenda itself. Still others involve development taking place within a community without the help of outsiders. Certain underlying principles are common to all these types of participation.

What finally counts is whether the 'project' goal or outcome is achieved, by evaluating its performance. Reviewing the different principles and characteristics embodied in these two development philosophies, this article discusses evaluation in terms of two approaches: *the subjective and the objective*. We examine each, and discuss whether they are mutually exclusive or compatible, and indeed whether evaluating project outcomes is worthwhile.

While participatory development projects are highly fashionable, less attention has been paid to determining whether their stated outcomes[1] will be achieved. Traditional top–down projects have usually

First published in *Development in Practice* 7(1) in 1997

been evaluated with respect only to their outputs[2] and not to their outcomes. We hope to help to fill the gap in development thinking about how to evaluate so-called development projects effectively.

Approaches to development projects

Most participatory development projects have similar characteristics and operate according to a general set of principles.[3] Firstly, these projects are supposed to be bottom–up, informed by the participants themselves. Secondly, participatory development claims to be holistic, taking into account a community's emotional, psychological, cultural, and spiritual needs as well as its physical needs (Goulet, 1995). Thus project outcomes are often intangible. For example, a project may set out to achieve empowerment, which is a state of being and not easily observable.

Furthermore, (the) development (project) is regarded as a process with no distinct end in sight. It takes place in a dynamic environment and responds and adjusts to changing situations. The major source of change in any community is probably not the development project. Hence, participatory development involves a long-term commitment of time and resources, and often involves a personal commitment to the people involved (Jiggins, 1995).

Evaluating an intangible process is difficult, for evaluation also then has to become a process. It must take place simultaneously and run parallel to development itself (Patton, 1982; Richards, 1985). The function of evaluation in this context is to inform, guide, and encourage the participants. Information is fed back, and appropriate adjustments are made, thus facilitating learning. Evaluation in a participatory context is subjective and based on culture. Understanding human behaviour and development from the participants' own frame of reference is considered important. Thus, social relations, power structures, and institutional factors are all taken into account (Salmen, 1987).

Non-participatory approaches are characterised by top–down activities and projects. These have a defined duration with a distinct end, and usually provide some tangible output (such as a dam). They involve a commitment of time and resources for a fixed period, regardless of whether the original goals are achieved. Such projects are linear, adhering to a plan drawn up prior to implementation. The fundamental assumption is that a causal relationship exists between the actions, the outputs, and the outcomes (Jiggins, 1995). The project is regarded as the major source of change. Most such projects are evaluated with

regard to the achievement of the stated outputs as a function of allocated time and resources. The outcomes or goals are hoped for.

Table 1 compares participatory and non-participatory projects.

Table 1: Comparison of participatory and non-participatory projects		
	Participatory	**Non-participatory**
Locus of control	Bottom–up	Top–down
Duration	Indefinite	Defined period
Process	Cyclical, social learning process	Linear
Type of commitment	Long-term, often personal too	Length of the project
Hypothesis	The project is not the major source of change. It is only one part of a complex system.	A direct causal relationship exists between inputs and outcomes.
Outcomes	Intangible, as is the project itself	Tangible project and outcomes
(Table 1 summarises the experience of Goulet, 1995; Jiggins, 1995; Richards, 1985; and Salmen, 1987.)		

Approaches to evaluation

There are many definitions of evaluation. According to Patton (1982: 15):

> *The practice of evaluation involves the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs, personnel, and products for use by specific people to reduce uncertainties, improve effectiveness, and make decisions with regard to what those programs, personnel or products are doing and emphasizes (1) a systematic collection of information about (2) a broad range of topics (3) for use by specific people (4) for a variety of purposes.*

This definition is useful, since it is comprehensive, flexible, and broad, while others tend to be more specific. It is good to be flexible enough to understand which definitions of evaluation are appropriate and meaningful in a particular context.

It is also helpful to realise that many types of evaluation exist along with many methods. Here, two main approaches are examined. Generally these are referred to merely as *evaluation* and *participatory evaluation*; here we call them *objective* and *subjective evaluation* respectively, in order to avoid confusion. The former refers to any evaluation which follows the standard paradigm of seeking

quantitative facts in an objective, technocratic manner. Emphasis is placed on measurability; and reviewing timeliness, efficiency, and value for money is standard. Analysis is generally objective and scientific, reducing reality to its smallest possible components. Conclusions are then drawn from these findings. If such an evaluation does look at social phenomena, the facts or causes are sought, with little regard for the subjective states of the individuals.

A distinction needs to be made between participatory evaluation and the evaluation of participation. Subjective evaluation refers to the former. Evaluating participation, on the other hand, could be done using either the objective or the subjective approach. Subjective evaluation is concerned less with measuring efficiency or value for money, and more with measuring the effectiveness of an action, or not measuring anything at all. It concentrates on the qualitative aspects of development, assessing what is taking place, and making recommendations accordingly (Jiggins, 1995). Models are not used to explain reality, because it is felt that reality is too complex to simplify in this way. In trying to simplify it, some important insight or observation could be lost. Thus, goal-free evaluation is preferred, whereby goals (or outcomes) are emergent and grow out of the environment in which evaluation is taking place (Patton, 1981; Patton, 1982; Richards, 1985). This coincides with the hypothesis that the project is probably not the only source of change within a community.

Subjective and objective evaluation

It is tempting to talk about evaluating top–down and participatory projects as if they were distinct. This would be foolish, however, since both subjective and objective approaches can be used for evaluating either type of project. The appropriate approach will depend upon several factors. For instance, who will be using the evaluation results; what the purpose of the evaluation is; who is doing the evaluating; and when the evaluation is taking place.

An evaluation always has an audience in mind, someone who has requested that an evaluation be done. This 'someone' could be a funding agency, or it could be the management team of the organisation conducting the research, or the research team, or the community involved in the project. The purpose of the evaluation depends on who will be using the results, since each party has its own specific needs. A funding agency is generally more interested in how efficiently the research was conducted, whether it got value for money, and whether

the project was finished on time. A research team is probably more inclined to want to know which methods worked most effectively in gathering information, where it can improve its practices, whether any important information was omitted, and whether the goals of the project have been reached. A community is more interested in knowing whether everyone was included in the research, whether the research was appropriate, and whether it took different groups and power structures into account (since this will give the research credibility in the eyes of the community members). Management is concerned about timeliness and efficient use of resources, about reaching the original goals, any other results that may have transpired, and whether personnel have performed as expected.

Subjective evaluations tend to be more suited to the needs of the research team and the community, since they will produce the information they seek most effectively. Objective evaluation tends to meet the needs of the funding agency or management, for the same reason.

Who is conducting it plays a key role in the type of evaluation to be used. If the same research team is also responsible for the evaluation, they are likely to use an approach which coincides with that of the project. Researchers implementing a participatory project are committed over the long term, and are interested in assessing progress along the way in order to be able to respond to new situations, and adjust methods where they are not achieving what they intended. Thus, such researchers will be inclined to use subjective evaluative methods. The team who built a dam may prefer an objective approach, since this will deliver the information they are after. Similarly, an outsider evaluating the participatory project may choose an objective evaluation method, if it is being done for management or the funding agency.

Not to be forgotten is the fact that the choice of evaluation type is itself subjective. Evaluators will be inclined to choose the method which fits with their own philosophy. Hence, one person may be inclined to use subjective evaluation when examining the effects of the newly built dam on people in nearby villages, and those who have been resettled in the process.

Finally, *when* the evaluation takes place will also determine the type that is used. If it is to inform learning throughout the implementation process, the subjective approach may be chosen. But it is often easier to use the objective approach if the evaluation is being conducted after the project has been completed. Again this will partly be determined by the type of information which is being sought.

Richards (1985) is critical of using an approach to evaluation which is dictated by its purpose. Rather, he would have evaluators choose a method commensurate with the type of project, and deduce the necessary information from there. We agree with him. Forcing (the) everyday life (of a project) to conform to the requirements of research does not make sense. Surely it is more expedient to look at everyday life, and draw conclusions from there.

Table 2 compares the subjective and objective approaches to evaluation.

Applicability

Discussion has centred around the type of evaluation which is used for both participatory and non-participatory development projects. There is some argument, however, about whether evaluation is valid at all in a participatory context. It is sometimes argued that evaluation has its origins in top–down approaches, and therefore is intrinsically inapplicable to participatory projects. Our view is that subjective evaluation has evolved largely in response to the rise of participatory projects. But in any case, evaluation is an inherent part of people's everyday lives. We do not necessarily call it that, but we constantly process information as it becomes available and use it to make

Table 2: Comparison of subjective and objective evaluations[4]		
	Subjective	**Objective**
When evaluation takes place	Simultaneous with project: parallel process	After the fact: separate event
What is evaluated	Measures effectiveness or does not measure at all. Analyses social relations, power structures, and institutional factors	Measures efficiency, timeliness, value for money
Model	A complex system not explicable by a model	Reality is reduced to its smallest possible components
Type of activity	Learning process	Evaluation
Framework	Context-specific	Basic framework adjusted slightly for different situations
Nature of evaluation	Subjective, participatory, culturally based. Concerned with understanding human behaviour and development from the participants' own frame of reference.	Objective, scientific, and technocratic. Seeks facts or causes of social phenomena with little regard for the subjective states of individuals.

(Table 2 summarises the experiences of FAO, 1988; Jiggins, 1995; Patton, 1981; Patton 1982; Richards, 1985; and Salmen, 1987.)

decisions about the future. Following the news is one example. Keeping a diary is another. This activity is not restricted to Western civilisation either: rural and indigenous communities have their own ways of doing the same thing. Early-warning systems and story-telling have the same functions. So, evaluation happens continuously. What is important is that the correct approach is used for the situation in question.

There are benefits and disadvantages in everything. Evaluating a project (using whatever approach) can never look at every aspect, and necessarily carries the danger of missing some major insight (Jiggins, 1995; Richards, 1985). Knowing that a project is going to be evaluated can lead to some bizarre situations, too. It may lead to inaction, because implementers are afraid of the consequences if something goes wrong, and it comes out in the evaluation. They may cover up things that took place and in so doing mask the real dynamics behind what happened. Or a show may be put on for the evaluators on the day they visit the project. All these will lead to incorrect conclusions. But not evaluating has pitfalls too. It exonerates project implementers from being accountable for the responsible use of resources. The opportunity for learning and improvement is also forfeited. In evaluating development projects, we need to be aware of these issues and interpret the results accordingly.

Synthesis

In addition to the four main factors informing the type of evaluation to be chosen, underlying assumptions inherent in the project design will also be reflected. Thus it is often true that objective evaluation will be used to evaluate top–down projects, and subjective evaluation for participatory projects.

But both approaches have had a tendency to throw the baby out with the bath-water. Non-participatory development and objective evaluation follows the Western scientific paradigm, and in so doing ignores the important social interactions which affect the outcomes of a project – even those which set out to produce tangible outputs. Changing the environment will always have political ramifications (within the household, the community, the local authorities, or national government) which will influence the success of a project. Recognising that various aspects of life interact with each other would go a long way towards understanding why a given project turns out the way it does. Hence the need to look at how a project interacts with other factors, and *vice versa*. Further, objective evaluation often runs the risk of becoming

so independent and objective that it loses sight of the needs of the participants, beneficiaries, and managers – and so is not relevant to them (IDRC, 1994).

Subjective evaluation tends to discount measurable goals such as efficiency, because 'participatory projects' are concerned with qualitative things such as gender or power relations. Further, interim goals are seldom set, because there is no telling how long it will take to reach them. This is a valid argument, but some broad objectives need to be set – otherwise practitioners are free to do as they please, with no accountability, and the capacity to waste a tremendous amount of resources. Wasting resources (whether time, money, or effort) does not enhance sustainability for instance, nor value for money, and does not make sense in the long run. Thus, measuring efficiency, timeliness, value for money, and so on is important. Paying attention to these aspects will hold practitioners more accountable for the resources they are using in the name of development. What may be necessary, though, is to find new ways of defining them, so that they can be used in a context where there are very vague goals, and no definite end to a project.

Unfortunately, even participatory evaluation is often concerned with looking at a 'project' in isolation. Often only the social interactions within the community itself are studied, ignoring the effect of the research team within the community. If these interactions were reviewed, it could lead to a better development process.

Another problem with objective evaluation is that it is often a one-off occurrence, to be performed at the end of a project. Subjective evaluation can be one-off, but often takes place on a continuous basis or at intervals throughout the project's lifetime. Objective evaluation could be valuable, if used at more than one point over a period of time. It would serve as a learning tool, and would encourage accountability.

Conclusion

As development practices have evolved, so has evaluation. Generally, the underlying assumptions and approaches of both have been the same. This is true for both the participatory and non-participatory approaches. At first glance, it would appear that the subjective and objective approaches to evaluation are mutually exclusive. But each has some validity and, brought together, they form an improved approach to evaluation.

While a pendulum swings from one extreme to another, at some point it comes to rest in the centre. This discussion brings the pendulum to the centre by recognising that each approach has its place, but that each could learn from the other. An amalgamation of objective and subjective approaches can lead to a more informed evaluation outcome, and an enhanced development project or process. Finally, while any type of evaluation has its shortcomings, we should not be paralysed into inaction. Evaluation, while not always referred to as such, is a part of everyday life — and so demonstrates its usefulness in whatever we do.

Notes

1   The terms 'goals' and 'outcomes' are used interchangeably in this article.
2   'Outputs' refers to tangible products resulting from a development project: for example, a dam or a number of houses. 'Outcomes' are what the project hopes to achieve as a result of the outputs: for example, capacity building or empowerment.
3   The question of who participates is, of course, an important question, but one which will not be dealt with here.
4   The information in Table 2 does not represent absolutes. Some which holds for the subjective column can just as easily hold for the objective column, and *vice versa*.

References

Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (1988) *Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation*, Bangkok: FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

Goulet, D. (1995) 'Authentic development: is it sustainable?' in *A Sustainable World: Defining and Measuring Sustainable Development* (Trzyna and Osborn, eds.), Sacramento: International Center for the Environment and Public Policy, California Institute of Public Affairs.

International Development Research Centre (IDRC) (1994) *Worksheets for Evaluation Planning*, Ottawa: International Development Research Centre.

Jiggins, J. (1995) 'Development impact assessment: Impact assessment of aid on nonwestern countries', *Impact Assessment* 13/1: 47-70.

Patton, M. Q. (1981) *Creative Evaluation*, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, Inc.

Patton, M. Q. (1982) *Practical Evaluation*, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, Inc.

Richards, H. (1985) *The Evaluation of Cultural Action*, London: Macmillan.

Salmen, L. F. (1987) *Listen to the People: Participant-Observer Evaluation of Development Projects*, Washington DC: The World Bank.