

STANDARD EVALUATION METHODOLOGIES AND NGO PROJECTS

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The conduct of project evaluations is a standard practice of multilateral and bilateral agencies which use evaluations largely as a tool to monitor and promote accountability for the use of official development assistance. Drawing primarily from the evaluation manuals of UNDP and USAID, this paper reviews the standard evaluation framework employed by multilateral/bilateral agencies and points to some of the issues arising from the application of the same evaluation methodologies to the work done by non-government organizations (NGOs). Although national governments remain the major recipients of official development assistance, NGOs have been increasingly mobilized to catalyze development activities and to serve as channels for official development assistance. The projects and programs run by NGOs therefore, are similarly subject to evaluations or project reviews.

This paper focuses on the issues arising from the application of the standard evaluation methodology to NGO-managed

projects and programs. It is divided into two parts: the first elucidates the standard evaluation practice in assessing programs and projects funded by multilateral and bilateral agencies; the second raises some of the issues in applying the standard methodology to NGO work.

Evaluations and Development Management

As management tools, evaluations are an integral part of the design and conduct of development projects. Project designs are typically based on the results of earlier studies and evaluations bearing on the special concern or problem area covered by a project. Project documents therefore, draw the rationale and objectives of projects from earlier study/evaluation findings and incorporate as well the planned evaluations that are to be undertaken during the lifetime or duration of a given project. Because planned evaluations are part of the project's management information system, the nature of these and their timing and budgets are also specified in the project document.

Evaluations then are meant to provide timely feedback on project progress and to surface issues and problems encountered in the course of project implementation. Specifically, the results of evaluations are used to improve current implementation activities, resolve project hindrances and bottlenecks, and to redesign projects and programs.

Other than providing the basis for decisions with regard project implementation, evaluation findings are likewise used as the basis for other crucial decisions, i.e., as to whether or not to continue or extend a project, or to expand and replicate this in other places or areas. Evaluation results are further used as inputs in the formulation of new development programs, strategies and policies. In brief, project evaluations are of use not only to the staff and immediate managers of projects, but also to higher-level managers, planners and decision-makers at the level of regional or sectoral programs, and those engaged in the formulation of overall development thrusts and policies.

Issues Commonly Addressed in Evaluations

In general, evaluations are expected to provide feedback on the *relevance* of projects, the *efficiency and effectiveness* of these, and on their *impact and sustainability*. In turn, the review of these areas is expected to identify *lessons learned* from the project to guide future planning and decision-making. In some instances, evaluations are also used by project managers, the implementing and donor agencies, or by the host government to obtain additional information on topics or questions that are of concern to them.

Because local and national conditions change, evaluations touch on the relevance of projects to note if the context, rationale, objectives and activities of a given project remain as relevant as at the time of project formulation (or during the preparation of the project document). This essentially entails a review of the project's logical framework (logframe) or of the assumptions made during its formulation and design to determine whether these and the project's objectives and activities continue to be relevant and valid.

In reviewing project efficiency and effectiveness, evaluations focus on the use of project resources and the flow of project activities. The concern of evaluations here is to see how well project funds and resources were used to realize certain outputs and attain immediate project objectives.

The review of the impact and sustainability of projects on the other hand, calls attention to project results and effects. Often, this entails an assessment of the consequences that a project has had on communities or beneficiaries, or on other areas of development concern. The contribution of projects to broader development goals is usually based on an examination of their effects and impact.

Evaluation reports, and particularly project terminal reports, usually cover all the foregoing aspects of project design, management and outcomes. In addition, terminal project reviews provide a synthesis of major evaluation findings and highlight the lessons learned from the project to guide subsequent development planning and programming and the design and implementation of specific development projects.

Types of Project Evaluations

There are four major types of project evaluations typically undertaken by multilateral/bilateral funding agencies, although donor agencies may require additional or special kinds of evaluations for certain purposes. The first of these are *ongoing evaluations* which are meant to provide a continuous feedback on project activities and progress. As such, ongoing evaluations, or project monitoring, as these are sometimes called, rely heavily on the routine data compiled as part of the management information system of projects. These data include financial accounting data, administrative records, and data on the timing and levels of project inputs and outputs. These data are reviewed to determine the status of project activities, and to track project performance especially with regard the provision of project inputs and the efficiency in the use of project funds. Information on project outputs, on the other hand, is used in ongoing evaluations to provide some limited indication of the attainment of project objectives as specified in the project document and logframe. Ongoing evaluations may also include the conduct of periodic small-scale surveys or rapid low-cost assessment to see whether the project is contributing to broader efforts at change and development.

A second type of evaluation is the *interim evaluation* or midterm project review that is undertaken midway before the completion of projects. In addition to reviewing project progress and efficiency, interim evaluations are done to identify issues or problems that could not be anticipated at the time of project formulation, and to seek solutions to hindrances/problems affecting project

implementation. These are likewise used to reassess the relevance of projects taking into account social, national and other policy changes which may have transpired since the inception of the project. Finally, interim evaluations are expected as well to provide an assessment of the short-term effects of projects and their likely sustainability.

The third type of evaluation is the *final project evaluation* or terminal project review conducted at the end of the project. Final evaluations draw heavily from the results of ongoing and interim evaluations and summarize the levels of project inputs and the nature of project outputs. These are then used to determine the attainment of project objectives and the sustainability of project accomplishments. Moreover, final evaluations draw attention to the lessons learned from the experience of projects and provide information on issues of interest to donor and implementing agencies and to planners and policy-makers of the host government.

The fourth kind of project evaluation is the *ex-post evaluation* which focuses on the effects and impact of a project on its intended beneficiaries. Because of the "lagged" effects of projects, ex-post evaluations are usually undertaken only after some time has lapsed (e.g., a year or two) following the completion of a project. More than the other types of evaluations, ex-post evaluations employ standard social science methodologies to determine project impact. Where data on the perceptions, aspirations and socioeconomic conditions of target groups are available before the project began, ex-post evaluations will usually employ a "before-after" survey design to measure changes that may have occurred among project beneficiaries and

areas. Otherwise, other approximations or "control groups" are used to estimate the contributions of projects to the changed conditions of beneficiaries. Ex-post evaluations also entail the construction of indices or measures for assessing the life-conditions of beneficiaries. Although some standard indicators have been developed to measure the impact of identical projects (e.g., as small-scale irrigation and community potable water projects), ex-post studies often develop indicators to reflect the specific concerns of projects.

Ex-post evaluations are expected to note both the positive and negative effects, and the intended and unintended consequences that projects have had on beneficiaries. These also provide a better indication of the sustainability of project benefits or outcomes over the longer-term. Additionally, ex-post evaluations call attention to economic, political and social factors that may have facilitated or impeded the development impact of projects. As with all kinds of evaluations, ex-post evaluation results are used as inputs in future planning and programming work.

Similar kinds of ongoing monitoring, and interim -, final -, and ex-post evaluations are sometimes undertaken for larger sets of initiatives, as for example, regional and sectoral programs that consist of several projects rather than of a single one. The results of program reviews are used to revise and improve on higher level country program strategies and national development policies.

Data Sources and Evaluation Procedures

As noted earlier, the data used in project evaluations include 1) those maintained by the project staff as part of

their management information system; and 2) those obtained through surveys, case-studies, key-informant interviews and other external statistical or secondary data sources. The assessment of project progress and the efficiency of implementation and the use of project funds draw from the first set of data, whereas determination of the development impact of projects are based primarily on the second.

Ongoing project monitoring or evaluations are typically internal evaluations undertaken by project management (i.e., the project manager and staff). Donor agencies, however, encourage the conduct of both internal and external evaluations for interim- and final project reviews, whereas ex-post evaluations are usually undertaken by external evaluation teams. It should be noted further that internal evaluations done by project management also elucidate on the processes surrounding project implementation, while external evaluations generally highlight the accomplishments attained by projects.

Table 1 presents some of the advantages and disadvantages of internal and external evaluations. Compared to external evaluators, internal evaluators have the advantage of being familiar with the project, and with the organization and procedures of the project's implementing agency. They are likewise more knowledgeable of the project areas and of the processes surrounding the planning and implementation of projects. Being members of project management moreover, internal evaluators are in a better position to adopt and follow through the recommendations made in project reviews. Internal evaluations are also less

Table 1
Trade-Offs Between Internal and External Evaluators

Someone From Inside	Someone From Outside
<u>Advantages</u>	
Knows the organization, its program and operations	May be free from organizational bias
Is not an adversary	May bring fresh perspective, insight, broader experience, and recent state-of-the-art knowledge
Has a greater chance of adopting/ following up on recommendations	Is more easily hired for intensive work
Is often less expensive	Can serve as an arbitrator or facilitator between parties
<u>Disadvantages</u>	
May avoid looking for facts or forming conclusions that are negative or reflect badly on organization/ individuals	May not know the organization, its policies and procedures/regulations
Tends to accept the assumptions of the organization	May be ignorant of constraints on feasibility of recommendations
Is usually too busy to participate fully	May be perceived as an adversary, arousing unnecessary anxiety
May be constrained by organizational role conflict	May be expensive (unless contracted locally)
	Requires more time for contract negotiations, orientation, and monitoring
	Can't follow up on recommendations
	May be unfamiliar with local political, cultural, and economic conditions

Source: USAID Evaluation Handbook

expensive, since these do not involve the hiring of external consultants.

On the other hand, external project evaluations are almost always required by donor agencies to ensure objectivity in the results of project evaluations. External evaluators are generally recruited from people who were not involved in the design, planning and implementation of the project under review, and who are technically competent in the area covered by the project. Being independent of the project and its management, external evaluators can provide fresh perspectives and insights in project assessments. Their experience and competence also place them in a position to relate the project results to those of similar project initiatives elsewhere and to broader development trends and activities. Finally, compared to members of project management who cannot be expected to devote full-time work to project reviews, external evaluators can be hired to undertake intensive evaluation work. Multilateral/bilateral agencies therefore, conduct *both* internal and external evaluations to ensure comprehensiveness, depth, objectivity and credibility in project reviews.

Problems Encountered in Standard Evaluations

Although project evaluations are planned ahead of time and are integrated in project designs, the conduct of evaluations is not without its own problems. One of these problems is the short period of time allotted for project reviews. While short evaluation periods are meant to provide quick and rapid feedback to project management, these are, in some cases, too short for the kinds of comprehensive and in-depth data

examination and analysis that donor agencies and project managers expect evaluators to provide. Problems arising from short evaluation periods are compounded in cases where evaluators need to collect survey and field data and other external statistical information, and where they are expected to continuously consult and validate their procedures and findings with project management. The collection of interview and external data and consultations with project managers and staff often require more time than can be accommodated within specified evaluation periods.

Second, project evaluations proceed from the assumption that the management information systems of projects are in place and operational. Many projects in the Third World, however, still lack the capability to implement and sustain a project management information system. The staff/personnel of projects are also still in the process of acquiring the necessary management, administrative and technical skills for efficiently running projects. Furthermore, since they are expected to attend to field implementation tasks and the updating of project records, the staff of some projects are overworked. As a result, project administrative and financial records, and monitoring and progress reports are not always in a form that can be readily retrieved and reviewed by evaluators. In turn, these contribute to difficulties in assessing the performance of projects.

A third problem area in project evaluations has to do with the indicators not only of project efficiency and performance, but of the project's development impact. The use of indicators is sometimes constrained by the lack of data

particularly in cases where no a priori or benchmark data were collected on beneficiaries (or the project's areas of concern), and by other difficulties in the selection and construction of impact indicators. Often the indicators of project impact are limited to measures of immediate project effects or outputs. Examples of these include the number of beneficiaries who have been organized, trained, provided credit or given some other forms of project assistance. Project documents however, contain or specify several other development objectives that are not easily observable or measurable. These include such objectives as the development of "self-reliant organizations and communities," the "empowerment" of beneficiaries, the "democratization" of resources, the promotion of the "productive uses" of skills training and credit, and others. While the attainment of these goals can partly be examined through a review of the project's logical framework or of the linkages between/among project activities, inputs, outputs and objectives, the inclusion of relatively abstract development objectives in many project documents suggest the need to develop new and appropriate indicators for these.

Issues in the Application of Standard Evaluation Methodologies to NGO Programs and Projects

The problems generated by the application of standard evaluation procedures to development programs and projects in developing countries are compounded when the programs are managed by development NGOs. Unlike government and contracting firms that are governed by monitoring and auditing rules similar to those of bilateral or

multilateral agencies, development NGOs are not only unfamiliar with the standard evaluation practice but also raise issues with some of its underlying assumptions. Grappling with evaluation-related problems between NGOs and funding agencies therefore, requires an understanding of the ethos of the development NGO community—the vision and spirit which moves it, its principles of governance, its internal modes of assessments and some of the tensions arising from the fact that global, national and local developments force it to combine its social mission with market considerations.

By virtue of its roots in the arduous political struggle against authoritarianism and the structural inequities besetting Philippine society, development NGOs are propelled by the mission of instituting alternative social and economic structures which democratize opportunities, enabling the more disadvantaged groups in society to realize their human potentials. Politically, this means "creating democratic structures that would no longer allow elite factions to speak in the name of the people". The mission, which can be aptly captured by the concept of popular empowerment, is nurtured by the progressive faction of the church, political movements and the concrete experiences of NGO members in development work.

In carrying out their "mandate", development NGOs hope to advance an orientation that is people-centered. Sensitivity to the needs of those the NGOs hope to serve, however, entails immersion in the everyday life of communities and constant dialogue with the people they help organize. While focusing on the subjectivities of partners in the field, the

NGOs' origins in the political struggle make them more conscious compared to other voluntary groups of the socio-economic and political conditions constraining their work with people at the grassroots. The tenacity of prevailing social structures has made community or sectoral organizing a key strategy in development NGO work.

The obstacles posed by prevailing local and national structures to organizing and social reform have made some NGO members skeptical even of the possibility of genuine change. However, their social philosophy's implicit faith in the capacity of ordinary people to take stock of their situation and mobilize to overcome constraints to their development, the existence of concrete cases of successful grassroots organizations, and fellowship or discussions with kindred minds have tempered this cynicism.

There is an inherent tension between the development agenda of NGOs and their faith in people's capacities. It is assumed, however, that with the establishment of mutual trust in the initial phase, the outcomes of the organizing process or of program implementation will be the result of open, albeit intense discussions and negotiations between the NGOs and the heterogeneous groups they are helping organize, with the caveat that whatever separate agendas they have will be transformed in the process. It is important to note that as far as NGOs are concerned, the processes by which decisions are arrived at are just as significant, if not more critical than the output of those processes. The premium given to processes implies that development programs, no matter how well planned, will undergo an iteration that

may even result in a shift away from initial program goals, objectives and strategies.

With a vision of popular empowerment as the "soul of the democratization process", the rules governing the way development NGOs deal with people at the grassroots and with themselves are based on the principles of democratic participation, collegiality and consensus when differences divide the community. While these principles are difficult to operationalize for various circumstances and while NGOs themselves have violated these principles because of exigencies of the situation, the guiding rule is to respect peoples' rights to participate in matters affecting them and to provide all the information necessary for people to come to a decision.

Given these principles, NGO evaluation methodologies consist of internally assessing their work in sessions where the group collectively reflects on project/program developments. They are also expected to facilitate such evaluations among the people they are helping organize. The fact that the group shares a common sense of the project and regularly receives updates on its status undermines the need to provide written documentation. Thus, sessions rich in lessons for future work remain undocumented and are eventually forgotten. It is for this reason that external evaluators have to go by with very few documents about a program. Furthermore, having been accustomed to time intensive verbal assessments that are validated and corrected by participants in the group, NGOs react strongly to the short time spent by external evaluators who as a result of their brief stint do not develop an appreciation of the realities NGOs confront.

Appreciating the priority accorded by development NGOs to an unfolding and iterative process on the one hand, and the principle of democratic participation on the other, is a key to understanding the strong reactions of NGOs to standard evaluation procedures that violate these principles. In general, standard evaluation practices are seen to gloss over project/program processes and to minimally involve project participants and actors.

Consequently, some development NGOs engaged in programs funded by multilateral or bilateral agencies tend not to appreciate the reasons behind evaluation procedures that do not adhere to their participatory or process orientation. But even if the individual commitments of program officers adhere to the principles upheld by development NGOs, they are forced to contend with changing policies in the home office, with the need to develop measurable indicators that will justify the release of taxpayers' money to a program or the withdrawal of potential funds that have been earmarked instead for other programs or areas.

In brief therefore, the standard evaluation of an externally-funded NGO project entails the meeting of two cultures with very different ideological premises, outlooks, standards for doing things, and imperatives. The challenge facing both sides is how to make the other understand its fundamental commitments and in the process bridge separate cultures through evaluation mechanisms that are enriched by the perspective of each one. The premise behind this challenge, however, is that both sides need each other. As the role of development NGOs expand in society, they will need access to bigger funds which ODAs can provide. On the other hand,

multilateral and bilateral agencies realize that their funds can reach the grassroots much faster if NGOs are tapped.

Following is a brief discussion of some of the issues raised by NGOs in relation to the standard evaluation procedures of bilateral and multilateral agencies.

On the Composition of the Evaluation Team

The previous section noted that external project evaluations are almost always required by donor agencies. From the point of view of funding agencies, external evaluators who have nothing to do with the project can provide an objective assessment and given their experience with similar evaluations, are in a position to relate the project to the bigger development context. While NGOs claim not to be averse to external evaluations, they are apprehensive over the capacity of these evaluators, no matter how technically competent, to understand the processes NGOs are undergoing in the context of macro and micro forces. For this reason, NGOs have lobbied for choice in the selection of technically competent evaluators who are sympathetic to their situation.

NGOs have not only asked to select external evaluators from a pool of competent and fair evaluators with an understanding of the NGO world, but have also sought representation in evaluation teams. This request for representation is motivated by the ability of other NGOs to obtain representation in project evaluation teams funded by private donor agencies. The evaluation team usually consists of a representative chosen by the funding agency, the NGO representative, and an external evaluator.

The practice of some donor agencies of getting its local evaluator from a pool of experts agreed upon or suggested by the NGO is a compromise position between actual representation in the team and a team constituted solely by the funding agency.

The constitution of an external evaluation team composed of experts acceptable to the NGO and the funding agency is another compromise. This compromise works best when evaluators are selected and exposed to the dynamics of the project early on in its development. Even then, however, it is not without potential problems. In cases where the NGO program or project involves partners with different ideological tendencies, the task of bridging divergent viewpoints among the partners and between them and the funding agency falls squarely on the shoulders of the evaluators. The acceptability of their evaluation hinges on their capacity to formulate objective criteria and indicators that would satisfy the funding agency's requirements while reflecting the substantial concerns of the NGOs. Acceptance of such criteria and indicators, however, is usually the outcome of time-intensive negotiations involving the evaluators. Although it addresses the issue of setting the criteria that is discussed below, this manner of forging a consensus around the evaluation criteria and instruments can take its toll on the evaluation team.

On Determining the Criteria for Evaluation

The Terms of Reference (TOR) between the funding agency and the NGO spells out the expected output of a program or project. This is the usual starting point

of evaluation. However, while the general criteria against which the project's achievements can be assessed may be implied in the TOR, its operationalization by the evaluation team has been a major source of tension, particularly when the criteria has not been agreed upon.

There have been at least two ways of addressing the potential conflict. One is to clearly specify the criteria and the range of operationalizations for the items involved in the TOR. While the advantage of doing this is apparent to both sides, the NGOs' bias for the processes and iterations which develop in the course of project implementation will have to be incorporated either in the range of operationalizations or among the criteria for evaluation. Currently, there are NGO attempts to develop evaluation criteria that are responsive to NGO realities and concerns.

A second way of addressing potential tensions is for the evaluation team to set the criteria together with the project managers. Depending on the project and the people involved, this may be easy or difficult to do. The added advantage of this strategy, however, is that the sessions between the NGO and the evaluation team are already part of the process of data gathering.

For community-based projects, it has been suggested that the communities involved be included in setting the criteria. While the evaluation team is encouraged to discuss with the community in the course of the evaluation, a preliminary session conducted by project managers and the community to explore people's recommended criteria for evaluation may prove useful. It may also be possible to bring in a representative of the community during

the criteria-setting session. Nevertheless, the decision on which criteria will be followed will be a subject of preliminary discussions and negotiations between the project managers and the funding agency.

On the Method of Evaluation

Pressure from the agency's home office and shifts in ODA policies have increased the demand for success indicators for programs and projects. Preference for measurable indicators has been apparent although as mentioned previously, representatives of funding agencies are also hard pressed to come out with indicators related to education, training, democratization, and community organizing. USAID, for instance, is struggling with the whole issue of measurement. It has just recently organized a workshop to identify some indicators of progress in their NGO projects and appropriate methodologies.

NGOs have argued against relying primarily on quantitative indicators for evaluation. They contend that such measures gloss over important processes which may have more relevance to the wider concerns of a project. For instance, funded lawyers' groups supporting agrarian reform efforts may consider the number of cases settled or won as an indicator of success. Although cases have been lost, the qualitative gains from the discussions between ordinary farmers and volunteer lawyers have actually advanced the democratization process.

It would be inaccurate to say, however, that NGOs are averse to developing indicators. There is a significant ongoing attempt on the part of some national and regional NGOs to come out with indicators for determining whether communities have been sufficiently organized to warrant the

pull out of NGOs. Conscious of the need to take the process of organizing into account, the indicators are being developed for different stages of CO work, from the establishment of adhoc structures to the consolidation of the organization, and to the point when the organized group is more or less autonomous of the NGO. This effort is noteworthy because the indicators are being developed with the participation of grassroots organizations. At present, the Community Organizing, Training and Research Advocacy Institute (COTRAIN) which serves as the Secretariat of the indicators project is consolidating the outputs of regional consultations into an instrument that will be pretested in October 1995.

While this significant indicators project is considering the phases of community organizing, still it may not completely capture important processes. As such, it would be necessary to strive for a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data. Triangulation, however, requires more time, analysis and expertise.

This brings in one of the sources of irritation which could undermine the significant contributions of evaluation reports. As previously noted, the time spent by the evaluator in discussions with people involved in the project has been used by NGOs as an indicator of the seriousness of the evaluation effort. It is ideal to lengthen the evaluation period. On the other hand, if nothing can be done about the time constraints, strategies to make up for little time without compromising the process of generating qualitative data and insights will have to be resorted to. NGOs suggest that group discussions in the field be maximized for data gathering purposes.

As a final point, project evaluation is important not only because of its implications for future funding but the opportunity it provides NGOs and the funding agency to take stock of their achievements and chart new directions. The accuracy and comprehensiveness of the information obtained by the evaluation team is essential to this process. A system of validation must, therefore, be in place. Current efforts to present the preliminary reports of external evaluators or those commissioned to synthesize disparate papers in workshops or other fora provide an excellent means of validation. Such workshop presentations are not only venues for correcting wrong information or gross misinterpretations and for consultations, but are also means for self-reflection.

In summary, some of the issues raised by NGOs regarding standard evaluation methodologies are:

- these do not sufficiently capture the subjectivities of program/project participants and the socioeconomic and political conditions that constrain NGO organizing and development work in the field;
- these also do not capture the "transformative" processes and outcomes (e.g., the empowerment dimension) of NGO organizing, education, discussions, negotiations and mobilization activities on program participants;
- given NGOs adherence to democratic participation, collegiality and con-

sensus-building, standard evaluations are not seen as participatory enough since these do not allow for the sufficient involvement of program staff and participants in defining the terms and operationalizing the criteria and procedures for evaluation; and

these rely heavily on quantitative indicators of program performance and outputs and ignore important qualitative processes and outcomes.

To help ensure that some of their concerns are addressed in evaluations, NGOs have lobbied to have a voice in the selection of external evaluations and for representation in evaluation teams. It is noteworthy that development NGOs have currently worked on evolving criteria for assessing program "processes" and iterations considered important in their work. Parallel efforts are being expended by donor agencies. The dissemination of the results of these efforts in joint workshops and dialogues will go a long way in ironing out some of the problems associated with evaluating NGO development work.

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