

## LEARNING FROM PARTICIPATORY EVALUATIONS

Evaluations have many aspirations, not only to account for results. Evaluations are tools for reflection and learning, for decision-making and team-building, for ownership creation and empowerment, and for advocacy. The current – and no doubt indispensable – debate on providing robust evidence on the impact of development interventions tends to lose sight of the valuable multifunctionality of evaluations.

By Kai Schrader

The discussions around rigorous evidence on the impact of development programmes and the use of accurate scientific methods tend to veil the subjectivity of impact evaluations; the moment, the research subject, the methods, the “deliverables” and the participants, both evaluators and evaluated, are the result of intentional multistakeholder decision-making. There is a purpose behind each evaluation, which needs to be outlined in the description of the process and methodology applied of an evaluation. Since impact evaluations are costly investments, donors certainly play a crucial role regarding the type and quality of such exercises.

Helvetas, as a “Learning Organization”, endeavours to strengthen the learning aspect in most of its undertakings, methods and tools, evaluations included. Convinced that learning is, as described by Harold Jarche, an advisor on organisation development, “a continuous process of seeking, sensing, and sharing” and happens through participation, engagement and communication, we support our partners and staff in leveraging their rich and diverse knowledge by fostering critical reflection and exchange. In the field of project or programme evaluations, we therefore explore, promote and apply methods that bring in the knowledge and perspectives of stakeholders at various levels. Some of these are described in the following.

### PRIMARY STAKEHOLDER AND LOCAL INSTITUTIONS – SOCIAL AUDITS AND “BENEFICIARY ASSESSMENT”

Social Audit, the assessment of the performance of “duty bearers” – e.g. public services of local governments – carried out by the “right holders”, citizens or users of such services, is an evaluation method that improves “downward” accountability and, finally, the quality of public services. Social Audits as well as Client Satisfaction Surveys are useful learning tools in projects that support local public institutions in discharging their responsibilities in delivering quality public services and



Community representatives in Nepal (Thakur Thapa) answering people’s questions during a Public Audit.

Photo: HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation

respond to citizens’ needs. The strengthening of such participatory and inclusive evaluation practices contributes to creating processes for dialogue between stakeholders that per se are results of development, as we have observed in Eastern Europe and Bangladesh.

Another approach or methodology which also fosters the empowerment of primary stakeholders is the “Beneficiary Assessment”, as it has been known since its description by then World Bank’s Lawrence Salmen in the 1990ies. It is a qualitative method used to improve the impact of development operations by capturing the views of intended beneficiaries regarding a planned or ongoing intervention. Community members, farmers or other project participants are trained as peer observers in a two- to three-day workshop. They then identify the research questions and enter a process of interviewing peers in their communities. The objective of this method is to assess the value of an activity as perceived by project beneficiaries and to integrate findings into project steering. It is designed specifi-

cally to undertake systematic listening of the project participants and other stakeholders by giving voice to their priorities and concerns. This method of systematic consultation is used by project management as a design, monitoring, and evaluation tool. The WARM (Water Resources Management) project in Nepal (see Box on page 17) shows that the nature of Beneficiary Assessment provides the development of peer observer skills, which are appreciated by the participants and communities and can benefit other development processes such as identification and planning of new interventions.

### OWN STAFF AND PARTNERS – PEER REVIEWS AND “CAPITALISATIONS” FOR KNOWLEDGE SHARING

External assessments of interventions are valuable and indispensable pieces in Project Cycle Management. While final evaluations are usually performed by external collaborators, project Mid-Term Reviews can be conduct-





Stakeholders evaluating a Farm Water Management project in Kyrgyzstan.

Photo: Stefan Stolle



## RESULTS OF PARTICIPATORY IMPACT ASSESSMENTS (PIA) IN WATER AND SANITATION PROJECTS\*

### “Water Resource Management Programme in Nepal” (WARM-P), HELVETAS

- Clients of water supply services report improvement of water quality and time savings.
- 80 per cent of households have a toilet and use it.
- Focus group participants indicate no discrimination based on caste and economic hierarchy.
- Need to strengthen the behaviour change of hygiene and sanitation.
- Stakeholders appreciate project’s overall participatory approach of identifying WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) priorities.

\* Studies conducted in 2013

### “Rehabilitation and Improvement of Water Sources in Borana, Ethiopia”, HEKS & OSHO

- Community members played an active role in identifying water sites for rehabilitation and during the construction process.
- Water is considered a shared property for everyone, irrespective of social status.
- Perceived changes were shortened distance to water source and year-round availability of water.
- Improved human health by better water quality, but no difference in animal health; participants requested additional water schemes.
- The process was considered empowering, and participants of validation workshop unanimously called for the use of PIA in the future.

ed without external support by own thematic advisors and involve staff and partner organisations. Although this is a lighter and more flexible process, it often brings valuable findings as participants tend to be more engaged and more critical of their own performance than external evaluators who might need to communicate more cautiously. Moreover, the teams joining a self-assessment exercise gain ownership on the findings, conclusions and recommendations. Their contributions to the procedure translate into stronger commitment towards complying with agreed follow-up actions.

We also endorse processes that bring in stakeholders, professionals, partners and colleagues at different stages for evaluations of highly complex operations or higher-level evaluations, for example for sector- or country programme evaluations. Peer reviews focus on the facilitation of such endeavours and bring the people together, be it face-to-face and synchronous or at distance and nonsynchronous. The multiple perspectives and expertise of involved individuals and the numerous insights and opinions enrich such evaluations and foment learning among peers; this is a moment of intense knowledge sharing. Bringing together and showcasing the experiences of all colleagues participating in bio-cotton-projects (see Rural 21 no 2/2017) or interventions that focus on building up Rural Advisory Services offers learning opportunities for one’s own and many other organisations.

The Review of Country Strategies can bring in the valuable knowledge of many colleagues when facilitated in a participatory way. Country directors and thematic experts from neighbouring countries can contribute to analysing the progress of a country programme, and learning takes place at various levels and on

‘both sides’, evaluators and evaluated. This benefits mutual inter-organisational learning, the sense of belonging to one organisation as well as the regional focus of collaboration, as we have seen for example in Central Asia.

Another promising evaluation procedure after finalising longer interventions is the Capitalisation of Experience (CAPEX), which allows to gather and systematise all relevant project documents and collecting of insights from participants and external key informants on good practices, failures and lessons learned, as we recently did for our engagement in Bhutan’s Community Forestry Sector. CAPEX publications are important sources of information for strategic decision-making as well as for interested persons in the sector and the region alike. They are shared on relevant platforms and networks and are useful “certificates” for staff to show their career and expertise to others.

### LOOKING AHEAD

Internationally, there is a trend to professionalise evaluations and to put the decision on design, methods, indicators and measurement into hands of the academia. The interaction of NGOs with research institutions to understand impact is a very welcomed and fertile evolution. Scientific research in development projects is a complementary procedure of participatory methods, and not a substitute. Given its high costs and tardy results, rigorous assessments are exceptional studies that should be conducted regularly and well-planned in selected projects. But development organisations need information on impact of all their projects, at early stages of implementation and in a useful format for decision-makers in the countries.

Helvetas’ M&E strategy for improving result orientation and impact is to build up capacities for better evaluation in the teams that perform regular project M&E through training and coaching; to lift their attention from activities and expenditures to outcome and impact through improving reporting; to improve indicator selection and measurement methods at the very beginning of a project; and to make M&E slimmer and more useful. Finally, development organisations are also accountable for spending on M&E and impact assessments, which need to be justified by their usefulness for learning and steering, improving future actions and developing capacities in the countries. We therefore strive to mix methods and evaluation designs, to adapt the evaluation process and participants to the context and specific situation of the project and to be flexible and innovative with applied methodologies. The critical analysis of the “evaluability” of a project, the participatory process of defining methodology and timing, and the involvement of staff and partner organisations in impact evaluations contribute to capacity development, empowerment and learning.

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**Kai Schrader** is advisor for Evaluation & Learning at HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation. Having worked in development co-operation for over 20 years, he has focused his activities on participatory methods for planning and evaluation, rural development, and topics related to land use, agriculture, and ecology. Kai Schrader holds a PhD from the Centre for Development and Environment of the University of Berne.  
Contact: kai.schrader@helvetas.org

For more information on the Helvetas projects, see: [www.rural21.com](http://www.rural21.com)