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Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: Lessons from Anti-poverty interventions in Northern Ghana

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Introduction: Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and Evaluation are concepts that have often been treated as combined or closely related functions in many development interventions. IFAD (1999) points out that M&E is ‘the heart of managing for impacts’, defining managing for impact as ‘the need to respond to changing circumstances and increased understanding by adapting the project (intervention) so that it will be more likely to achieve its intended impacts.’

Over the last 60 years of North-South development assistance, particularly in poverty alleviation, Monitoring and Evaluation have been done with shifting dimensions as the foci of performance measurement. Much of the existing literature corroborates on the fact that both in practise and in theory, evaluation methodologies have shifted from purely technocratic and expert-oriented approaches to stakeholder inclusive and participatory approaches (Themessl-Huber & Grutsch, 2003; Keough, 1998; Chambers, 1994; Scriven, 1980).

Many evaluation practitioners and theorists alike agree that participatory methodology in monitoring and evaluation is generally the most popular approach in development interventions today. Biggs (1995) in Gregory (2000) recognizes this general trend towards the development and use of participatory methodologies in Evaluation, referring to it as the ‘participatory orthodoxy’. Many development actors have taken different approaches in making M&E participatory in their projects and programmes.

UNDP’s (2002) *Handbook for Monitoring and Evaluating for Results* defines participatory evaluations as “The *collective* (emphasis provided) examination and assessment of a programme or project by the stakeholders and beneficiaries”. While providing a basic understanding, it however remains vague in elaborating explicitly the extent to which various stakeholders ought to participate.

As Forss, Kruss, Taut & Tenden (2006) comment, “participation in evaluation process can mean many things and there are probably very few people who have similar expectations – or experiences for that matter”. Forss, *et al* (ibid.) further observe that the extent to which an evaluation is participatory depends on who takes part at what different levels of the evaluation process.

Argued from an ideal point of view, a truly participatory evaluation is one in which *all* the stakeholders take part in *all* the processes of monitoring and evaluation. While this idealistic perspective finds good acceptance in evaluation theory, much of the available literature shows that this is hardly possible in real practice (Miller & Lennie, 2005). Different development organizations and M & E practitioners take different steps in engaging the participation of stakeholders in their various interventions. It is this diversity in approach that presents problems in monitoring and evaluation in real practise.

Two major methodological problems arise. First, this diversity provides a leeway that could be misused by some evaluators in the sense that any inclusion of any stakeholder could be justified to be participatory. In his *Problematizing Participation*, Gregory (2000) shows the complexity of practical applications of the term ‘participatory’, arguing that “the notion of participation is ill-understood and is an important problem across a range of methodologies in evaluation”.

Secondly, the ‘loose’ conceptualization of participation presents a dilemma in formulating M&E policy on participation at an organizational level. Often, any development intervention will have several identifiable stakeholder *groups*, and certainly many *individual* stakeholders, whose participation may be direct, indirect or through representation. The third (participation through representation) has become the major challenge in building ‘participatory models’ in monitoring and evaluation today. It is a question of which stakeholders to include, at what stages of the M&E process and what criteria should be followed in selecting them.

While these questions might not be of major concern in ‘one time’ evaluation exercises, they present considerable challenges in institutionalized M & E settings where M & E exercises are routine and ongoing processes. With the increased attention to monitoring and evaluation in development interventions today, an analysis of M&E systems and their contextualized experiences need to be done more seriously (Liverani & Lundgren, 2007).

A clear understanding of participatory M & E approaches and experiences in institutionalized environments would be important in informing evaluation policy and practice in the 21st century. There being no golden rules in practising participatory M & E, a study of how participatory

methodologies are applied in various contexts is desirable. This study reports findings based on 15 selected anti-poverty interventions in Northern Ghana.

Aims and objectives of study

First, this study aimed to understand the ‘structural’ designs of the studied M & E systems/models, and secondly, to understand how the systems engaged the participation of various stakeholders, as a relatively new genre of *Evaluation Practice*. The objectives were as follows; i) Find out the nature of interventions that existed in response to the endemic poverty conditions in Northern Ghana; ii) Understand the nature of stakeholders and how they participated in the M & E processes iii) Investigate how the M & E systems integrated best practice guidelines on evaluation and on stakeholder participation.

Methodology

This study sampled 15 interventions from agriculture, microfinance/livelihoods and health. A preliminary study showed that these three areas were the main focus of most anti-poverty interventions in Northern Ghana. The sampling was based on interventions initiated by local development agencies which were funded by Cordaid and/or ICCO Alliance. The two mentioned Non-Governmental Organisations are Dutch international development agencies based in the Netherlands. They mainly receive funding from the Dutch government and in turn provide funds to a number of local development agencies based in the South, particularly Africa.

A stratified sampling technique was used, with *region* being the first stratum and *sector* of intervention being the second stratum. As a result, six interventions were sampled from Northern Region; three from agriculture, one from health and two from microfinance. Six were sampled from the Upper East Region; four from health, one from agriculture and one from livelihoods. Three were sampled from Upper West Region; two from agriculture and one from livelihoods.

The overall design of the study was a rapid appraisal. It consisted of focus group interviews, administered questionnaires, site visits and document analysis. The intervention organizations were the primary target population. The intervention implementers were the second target population, consisting of project officers, whose capacities were relevant to monitoring and evaluation. Such capacities included designations such as M & E officer, Project Secretary, Project manager, extension officers, field officer, and Micro-credit officer, among others. All the officers who participated responded to administered questionnaires. Four focus group meetings were also held, one with the Northern Ghana M & E resource team during their first semi-annual review meeting of the year 2008, and three focus groups held with various officers in PAS (Presbyterian Agricultural) stations of Garu

and Mile 7 (Tamale) and Evangelical Presbyterian Agricultural Stations in Yendi District (Consisting of officers from Yendi, Saboba and Chereponi).

A range of documents were examined, including annual general reports, project proposals, and M & E frameworks among others. These gave insights on the programme theories and on planning and reporting systems of the studied interventions.

The northern Ghana Anti-poverty interventions

Northern Ghana has been ranked as being the poorest over the recent decades by successive National Livelihood Surveys (GSS series 2007, 2000, 1992). This fact is corroborated by the Ghana government's Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper 2006 – 2009 (NDPC, 2005). Northern Ghana is composed of three regions; Upper West, Upper East and Northern. In total, Northern Ghana has an estimated population of about 3 million (GSS, 2007). Major ethnic groups include the Dagomba, the Mamprusi and the FraFra (www.ghanaweb.com).

A number of reasons have been given to explain the endemic poverty in the region. The range of such arguments has varied from colonial legacies (Plange, 1979; 1984), to consistently little attention by the post-Independent governments in the Ghana Republic (Dietz, Miller & Obeng, 2002). For instance, Canagarajah & Pörtner (2002) in their study show that the three regions of Northern Ghana had the least *benefit incidence*¹ in government subsidies in education throughout the 1990s, both at primary and secondary schools. They further show that throughout the 1990s, the three regions also had the least access to health facilities as compared to the other seven regions in Ghana. A comparative study on equity in distribution of health services conducted by Asante, Zwi & Ho (2006) concluded that generally the three regions of Northern Ghana are more deprived in terms of access to health care than those in Southern Ghana.

Ghana's Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper 2006 – 2009 (NDPC, 2005) gives a case of the cocoa boom in Southern Ghana as part of the explanation for massive development inequalities between Southern Ghana and Northern Ghana. Many writers have argued that the booms in Agriculture and Industry in Southern Ghana are a result of special attention to the region by British colonial administration, to the neglect of Northern Ghana (Plange, 1979). As a result, there were massive migrations from the North to the South, as people moved for better economic prospects. This left a poorly developed social capital in the Northern part, a situation which has not been well addressed in post-independent Ghana.

¹ unit subsidies per school-aged child

More prominently however, the poverty phenomenon has been explained from perspectives of environmental factors. Situated along the Sahel climates, Northern Ghana experiences sub-humid to semi-arid conditions. There are dry, hot spells from October to early May every year. There is only one rainy season in a year, coming between May to late September or early October. More often the rainy season comes in a torrential manner, which again causes more calamities than it supports productive agriculture. Such environmental adversities have affected agricultural activities, leading to low agricultural yields every year.

The poverty situation is also compounded by the fact that the three Northern Ghana regions have very little employment opportunities as compared to the other parts. Historically, Northern Ghana has experienced high rates of unemployment and low economic opportunities. The high rates of unemployment are also due to the fact that education levels are generally low comparatively, assessed from school enrolment rates². Recent statistics show an enrolment rate of 61.8% at primary school level and 18.9% at secondary school level, against national averages of 84.5% and 40.9% respectively (GSS, 2007).

It is in response to the discussed background that Northern Ghana has witnessed a number of anti-poverty interventions, mostly in the areas of agriculture, microfinance, education and health. The present study found that agriculture has been the focus of many development actors since the 1950s. Earliest known agricultural intervention was started by the Presbyterian Church of Ghana in conjunction with the Dutch Mission Board. The first agricultural station was started in Garu District of the Upper East Region. This was later followed by other interventions initiated by different agencies such as the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the Catholic Diocese and the Methodist church in various parts of Northern Ghana. In time, areas of interventions diversified from food security to health, incomes and other spheres of poverty reduction in various districts in the three Regions.

This study found that the main development actors in Northern Ghana are religious organizations. No Muslim-related interventions were encountered during this study (perhaps due to sampling reasons) but a relatively large number of Christian-based interventions were encountered. From this study it was reported that the churches, which are the key development actors in the region, view socio-economic development of their catchment areas as a necessary extension of their ecclesiastical ministry.

Key findings

² Proportion of those in the relevant age range attending primary and secondary school.

The first major finding was that RBM (Results Based Management) was the most popular M & E system in the region, adopted by 87% of the studied interventions. The rest of the 13% observed that they did not necessarily apply RBM, due to the nature of their interventions. For the first organization, its M & E system was predominantly influenced by indicators from within its industry (banking), which was not fundamentally designed after the RBM system. The second organization designed its own M & E system, which was basically a checklist of internally determined indicators. Again, this was not purposely designed after the RBM methodology, and would vary from time to time.

Further, the manner in which RBM was modelled in this region differed a little from orthodox RBM in the sense that it was a blend of both Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) and the traditional RBM, characterized by the use of Log Frames. Traditional (orthodox) RBM by its characteristics belongs more to the Goal-Based Evaluation approaches. Theoretically, it is argued that PME and Goal-based approaches belong to different generations of evaluations and are perhaps diametrically opposed (MDF, 2007).

While the Goal-based approach operates on *a priori* principles as the basis of evaluations, PME focuses more on stakeholder participation. In practice, the former has been applied with strong connotations of exclusiveness and expert drivenness while the latter has been discussed with connotations of inclusiveness and watered down expertise. These connotations in the literature make PME and traditional RBM to stand opposed to each other. In the Goal based approach it is the evaluator's reality that matters while in participatory approaches it is the stakeholders' reality that matters (Mabry, 2002).

UNDP (2002) defines Results Based Management as "a management strategy or approach by which an organization ensures that its processes, products and services contribute to the achievement of clearly stated results". In some literature, RBM has also been referred to as *Performance-Based Management* (Kusak & Rist, 2001). Pertinent to this study, Kusak & Rist (ibid.) argue an important theoretical distinction between Traditional M&E systems and RBM as an M & E system. They observe that traditional M & E focus on inputs, activities and outputs (i.e. implementation) while RBM combines both the traditional M&E approach and an assessment of results. Hence the Traditional approach lacks the results assessment aspect.

RBM as an M & E system makes use of a second concept, Logical Framework Analysis (LFA). UNDP (2002) defines LFA as "a methodology that *logically* relates the main elements in programme and project design and helps ensure that the intervention is likely to achieve measurable results". In many interventions LFA is used as an important tool for planning and is very instrumental in intervention

implementation. The main idea is to guide implementers in ensuring that the objectives of the intervention are met. This is the key strength of RBM.

LFA as a component of RBM is widely embraced, though it also has numerous weaknesses which put in question the desirability of RBM as a methodology in participatory evaluations. IFAD (1999) points out that one of the strongest criticisms of LFA is that "... it can lead to a rigid and bureaucratically controlled project design that becomes disconnected from field realities and changing situations". From experiences in the Northern Ghana interventions, other challenges in the application of RBM include the following: conceptual difficulties, too much time involved, bulky paperwork, and concentration on immediate results, which may at times yield misleading opinions about the interventions in the short term (Obure, 2008). Interventions and strategies which may have negative or no impacts in the short term may eventually have remarkable impacts if they were given a little more time.

The second major finding of this study was that though there was considerable evidence of stakeholder participation in the M & E processes, participation of beneficiaries (Downstream stakeholders) was more from an 'inclusion perspective' and little from a 'decision making' perspective. This has a policy implication for participatory methodologies in general, where the essence of stakeholder participation is understood to be *empowerment* in terms of decision making. It is an important focus of advocacy for critical social science, of which post-modern evaluation (participatory evaluation) is an example (Mabry, 2002).

This study was conducted along a critical theoretical approach, critiquing the power that stakeholders have beyond mere participation but also in decision making. With relevance to this study, the practice of evaluation at an institutional level should be oriented towards increasing not just broader stakeholder participation, but an empowered decision making as well. This is an issue of evaluation policy.

Levels of stakeholder participation have been a hotly debated dimension in development practise, ever since the advent of participatory methodologies (Chambers, 1994; 2007; Gregory, 2000). To what extent should which stakeholders participate? Opinions have varied on this. Some advocates of participatory methodologies desire the participation of as many stakeholders as possible in all the stages of M & E. On the other hand, some would be content with 'participation through representatives'. Many have argued that as long as representatives of stakeholders are included in 'some relevant' stages of the process, the exercise is deemed participatory.

Consequently, this leaves the responsibility of determining in what stages the stakeholders should participate to the organizational mechanisms of the particular interventions or to the contracted evaluator. While eventually such M & E procedures would still pass the 'participatory test', they could easily lead to what Clements, Chianca and Sasaki (2008) call *positively biased evaluations*. As they observe, while the evaluation reports under such circumstances may report successful impacts (under RBM/ Log Frame) systems, they often fail to address the learning challenge both for the intervention and for the broader development community. In essence, leaving this obligation to the implementing organization itself could significantly affect the value of intervention evaluations and hence the real impacts of the poverty alleviation agenda.

Embedded in the issue of participation is the issue of power relations. If stakeholder participation is discretionary and 'manipulatable', as discussed above, then the question is whether participatory evaluation is meeting its fundamental goal of emancipating the previously sidelined stakeholders. Findings from this study show that the M & E process in development interventions is still controlled from the midstream (by implementing agencies) and from the top by donors.

The study found that the determination of intervention themes still has a top-bottom characteristic, which sometimes is in conflict with the perspectives of the beneficiaries. For instance, while the local organizations, together with the beneficiaries, felt that agricultural production should be oriented more on meeting the subsistence needs of the Northern Ghana population, the prominent donors in the region, especially ICCO Alliance, favoured market oriented agriculture. From the arguments of the pro-subsistence respondents, this change would leave the farmers with very little to feed on and would also affect the communities' nutritional diets. While they produce for the market, the existing market structures might not be well developed to handle such a sudden thematic switch as argued in *The Farmer* newsletter (ACDEP, 2007).

The third and final major finding is that these M & E systems are modelled in a way that the monitoring component is strong while the evaluation component is weak. Between the two concepts of Monitoring and Evaluation, there is a third concept in local use, 'Review', which practically occupies the center stage of the M & E processes. It arguably replaces the concept 'evaluation' in local practice. A clarification of the concepts is necessary to help understand whether 'Review' and 'evaluation' could be used synonymously in practice, and if not, what gaps the existing models would leave.

During this study, five Review sessions were visited, and in other cases, an examination was done of the review proceedings. All these showed that the review sessions mainly involved *tracking*, and *counting*, based on a priori objectives. The tracking and counting were invariably followed by variance analysis between achieved and targeted objectives. This would then be followed by deliberations on

what strategies were needed to improve on the performance. As Frankel and Gage (2007) point out, tracking and counting of data form the essentials of monitoring. But the *rationalization* of the results of the tracking and counting (that is the variance analysis and the adjustments of strategy) would constitute the 'Review'.

The OECD 'Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results-Based Management' (OECD, 2002a) comments that the terms 'Review' and 'Evaluation' have been used interchangeably, but distinguishes that Evaluation is used for a more comprehensive and/or in-depth assessment than 'Review', though both involve an assessment of the performance of an intervention periodically or on an *ad hoc* basis. Much as all the interventions visited had an elaborate M & E procedures in place, none of them confirmed having done a summative impacts evaluation independent of the routine M&E activities, though some had run more than two project periods.

This raises questions on summative evaluations on the projects, and how this would affect the performance of these interventions in the poverty alleviation agenda. As earlier argued, judging the performance of interventions purely based on periodic reports as many donors do could contribute to positive bias. Clements, Chianca and Sasaki (2008) argue that positive bias overstates the worth of outcomes, encourages complacency within the interventions and also undermines cost effectiveness in the intervention community.

This study therefore finds a gap created by the two concepts when the concept 'Review' is substituting the concept of 'Evaluation' in practise. This is an issue that could be addressed through evaluation policy at an institutional level.

Lessons Learnt

A number of lessons arise from this study. First, that broadened participation of stakeholders (holistic participation) does not necessarily compromise the professional standards of evaluations. Competent evaluations could still be achieved, though this requires good capacity building among the stakeholders. The more competent the stakeholders are, the more the evaluation will be of quality. This is an important lesson in designing institutional M & E systems. Broadened participation, backed up by efficient capacity building could greatly promote the utility value of evaluations among the intervention stakeholders.

Though a number of people have argued that broadened participation is not possible, hence advocate for participation through representatives, this study shows that Northern Ghana can be seen as an example of where participation, especially of beneficiaries, was made as extensive as possible, particularly at the downstream level. Despite the fact that their roles were decided upon by

implementing agencies, the study shows considerable participation from the beneficiaries. At the community level, the beneficiaries were able to collectively agree on symbols that would be used in simple M & E data collection formats. In some cases such as agricultural interventions, every participant kept the records and did the actual data collection. These records were later collected and aggregated by the intervention officers.

Though participation by representatives has been widely practised, it is a fact that the composition of who participates in an evaluation significantly determines the findings and conclusions of the evaluation. Participation through representatives also does not do much to address the power issues inherent in non-participatory methodologies. Critiquing power relations in evaluation practice is important since one of the cardinal objectives of participatory evaluations is to 'give power back to the people'.

Holte-Mackenzie *et al.* (2006) observe that even among peers (who form one particular stakeholder group), serious power imbalances do exist, which may render evaluations weak. People chosen as representatives may often not reflect the perspectives of the entire category of stakeholders. The controversy on evaluation and the empowerment objective is well captured by Miller & Lennie (2005) who argue that at a theoretical level, the empowerment objective of participatory evaluation is too ideal in theory and have little truth in practise. They say that;

We argue that a critical approach to the application of empowerment evaluation is required to avoid the idealism that tends to be evident in publications advocating this approach to evaluation (Miller & Lennie, 2005 ,p.19).

A number of different approaches have been adopted in evaluation practise in response to the empowerment challenge. As a result, some clear variants of participatory evaluation have been realized. Andima, Dietz & Kotomei's (2002) study in West Pokot District, Kenya shows one of such variants. Their methodology involved focus group discussions where local communities were *all* engaged in *recollection* and *reflection* exercises regarding previous poverty alleviation interventions in the region. A number of poverty alleviation interventions initiated in the region by different organizations were evaluated in historical perspective. The dimensions of evaluation were based on the communities' own perceptions of the outcomes of the various interventions. Through this exercise, the participants discovered their own abilities to set for themselves the dimensions upon which evaluations could be based. Nemeroff (2008) has used the same approach in Kwa Zulu Natal Province of South Africa, but calls it the 'Sustained Dialogue Methodology'. As this study argues, the two cases take an 'open door' policy on participation. They point to the direction that participatory evaluations

should take, the way that goes beyond participation by representatives to real public participation (holistic).

The second major lesson from the study regards the use of RBM as an M & E system in development interventions. Many have applauded RBM for being a strong tool for planning, monitoring and evaluation. Log Frame matrix is a popular tool in making sure that the implementation goes as planned and that intervention results can be tracked successfully. However, it is built upon the attribution principle, which on the other hand is entangled in the *causality* debate. Issues of causality have been long discussed in development interventions, with those opposed arguing that impacts cannot be attributed to particular ‘trackable’ causes within the intervention (DPRN, 2006). Evaluation reports that tie intervention impacts to the activities of particular intervention agencies would in this case be erroneous.

Further to the RBM problem of attribution, this study found that there are some qualitative outcomes which are normally not anticipated. This therefore means that such outcomes fail to be captured in the Log Frame matrix, though they present positive or negative impacts in the perspectives of the target beneficiaries. During this study, in an intervention that targeted improved post-harvest storage facilities, the Log Frame objective was to have a quantitative increase in harvest if the techniques involved were implemented by the farmers. During the evaluation, this objective was not met since there was actually a decrease in output (to the disappointment of project donors). However to the community the intervention was good, because it ‘reduced coughing’, and improved people’s health in the community, an impact that was not foreseen by the intervention. The question therefore arises as to whether the intervention was good or bad on the basis of the Log frame matrix.

The third lesson is that data management in M & E could be a shared exercise, and the extent to which evaluation becomes participatory depends on the extent to which the various stakeholders participate in the various stages of data management processes. It’s however a paradox, that the more participatory the data management, the more the loopholes. This finding disproves a section of evaluators who argue that engaging ‘unskilled’ stakeholders in evaluations reduces the quality of evaluations significantly (Saunders, 2006).

A fourth lesson arises from the synergy adopted by the studied interventions. Findings of the study report an extensive sectoral, inter-sectoral and regional co-operation in the M & E processes, mainly on agriculture, microfinance and health. There is cross inter-dependence on indicators setting, conducting baseline studies, and sharing community-level data, among others. In addition, peer review sessions offered a rigorous way to strengthen the performance of M&E procedures in these interventions. Lesson could be good for a multi-site evaluation.

For instance, multi-site interventions could use this method to organize internal Process Evaluations of their various units. A summative evaluator could also use this technique to foster a multi-site evaluation for instance, engaging the internal M & E personnel in setting dimensions of merit and in conducting some stages of the summative evaluation in a participatory manner. Multi-site evaluations often involve one *evaluand* (object of evaluation) which has different sites of implementation and each site running in its unique environment. Synergetic approach involving staff from the various sites could be useful in conducting site-based sub-evaluations as part of the whole, as specified in the Key Evaluations Checklist, KEC (Scriven, 2007). This approach could increase ownership of the evaluation within the organization and at the same time boost organizational learning.

Challenges

Conclusions

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