



The impact of Participatory Assessment of Development (PADev) on local change processes in East Mamprusi District Northern Ghana

Introduction

Impact evaluations have gained renewed attention in the wake of development effectiveness debates and discussions surrounding the post-2015 development framework that will replace the Millennium Development Goals. Such assessments illustrate what works, what does not and more importantly *why* certain interventions have positive, negative or no developmental outcomes. These evaluations are useful tools when it comes to deciding how donor funds should best be spent, which is a key issue on the agenda of governments, multilateral organizations and civil-society groups and actors. The approaches used for measuring impact range from random control trials, which adopt quasi-experimental techniques, to more participatory approaches that focus on stakeholder involvement. The importance of incorporating the opinions of beneficiaries of development interventions has been recognized since the 1990s and is being acknowledged as vital for understanding how development cooperation can yield better and more sustainable results. Listening to end-users' perspectives on development provides agencies with context-specific information on the needs, priorities and capabilities of different communities. Development agencies aiming to improve the design of their projects are thus increasingly adopting beneficiary-centred participatory evaluation designs.

Participatory Assessment of Development (PADev) is one example of an evaluation methodology that places beneficiaries' perspectives at the centre of the assessments. PAdEv workshops normally bring together about 60 people from various communities within a certain district to discuss the changes they have been experiencing.

However, instead of looking at the interventions of only one external actor, the PAdEv method first studies the changes seen in a region in a particular period and only then tries to establish which interventions contributed to which specific changes.

The benefits of PAdEv for development agencies have been recognised as it provides information that allows them:

- to realize their own impact *vis-à-vis* other actors
- to identify 'gaps' or 'saturation points' of development interventions in particular sectors or areas
- to gain insights into the most appropriate interventions in a specific geographic and/or cultural setting

- to assess which interventions benefit which groups (along gender, age and wealth lines)

From a beneficiaries' point of view the value of PAdEv has, however, been little investigated to date. Assuming that evaluations are interventions that have a direct cognitive and behavioural impact on participants, the question is how much do beneficiaries themselves learn from taking part in participatory evaluation exercises. How effectively do they use the knowledge they gain and can an evaluation process become more than a tool for extracting information that benefits development agencies and donors? We hope to answer these questions by examining the change processes that local community members go through both at a cognitive and at a behavioural level by taking part in Participatory Assessment of Development (PADev) workshops.

Map: Research areas Northern regions Ghana



Source: Dietz, et al. (2013) (self-edited)

The findings and change processes discussed in this Infosheet emerged from fieldwork conducted in 2010 and include the results of five focus-group discussions in four communities in East Mamprusi District and 15 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. The focus-group members participated in PAdEv workshops held in East Mamprusi District in Northern Ghana between 2008 and 2010. Five types of local change processes were identified. Four occurred as a result of participating in a PAdEv workshop and one emerged from the output of the workshops, namely the 'PAdEv Report' that was in some cases handed over to the local community leaders. The following change processes are addressed below: 'local history writing'; 'learning from peers'; 'collective problem-solving'; 'community-support groups' and 'incorporating PAdEv's findings in Community Action Plans (CAPs)'.

Table 1 Typology of local change processes resulting from PADev

	Participation-induced change*			Results-based change**
	Individual	Interpersonal	Collective	
Cognitive	Story of development	Peer learning (new farm techniques)	Story of development	Story of development
Behavioural	Chiefs starting to take the minutes of meetings	Story of development Adopting new farm techniques Community Support Groups (CSGs)	Community meetings	Community action plans

* Participation-induced change is 'the capacity of an evaluation process to affect stakeholders and the entity that is being evaluated'.

** Results-based change encompasses the instrumental, cognitive and political use of 'any information associated with the outcome of evaluations'.

Local history writing: Constructing a story of development

'Some of us who are young were also able to learn about the days before we were born. This is important because it allows us to make comparisons with the present.'

(interview headmaster government school, 2011, Langbinsi)

Local history writing is one example of the cognitive changes that beneficiaries have experienced as a result of taking part in a PADev evaluation. Throughout PADev workshops, a story of development, which is a holistic, historical account of the developments the community has gone through, is produced. This story can be categorized as an individual, interpersonal or even collective change at a cognitive level depending on the amount of 'history sharing' involved. An example of a story of development that has been used collectively is its incorporation in the curriculum of primary-school history classes in Langbinsi, which was one of the communities in the study.



Primary-school children near Gbangu, Ghana
Photo: Zjos Vlamincx (2011)

The respondents accentuated the intrinsic value of creating their own 'story of development' at the PADev workshops as it gave them a sense of ownership of their past and, consequently, of their future too. This should be situated in the socio-political context of Northern Ghana where communities are increasingly being confronted with multiple external actors and organizations that are influencing the region's development in various ways. Giving people the chance to share and create their own stories in such a setting is valuable as it provides them with a tool to reaffirm their rights to their own development pathways.

'These are the findings, now what do we do?'
(interview headmaster government school, 2011, Langbinsi)

In addition to the intrinsic value of local history writing, various community members also highlighted the instrumental value of the local story of development, which could be categorized as a behavioural change process. For example, the headmaster of a government school mentioned that the PADev workshop had enabled him and his staff to better understand their problems. However he felt that this should have been translated into action and he criticized the lack of follow-up after the PADev workshops. In his opinion, sharing hand-outs detailing key findings and appointing a local moderator, who could have updated the findings and organized community meetings, would have resulted in the evaluation exercise producing more tangible results for the community.

This case and the opinions of other respondents highlights how some beneficiaries clearly understand the importance and benefits of utilizing the findings of an evaluation effectively. The findings illustrate the willingness of beneficiaries to build on the insights they gained and their disappointment with monitoring and evaluation approaches that often neglect local knowledge distribution and ownership.

Learning from peers: Local knowledge exchange

'We learned about farming (for example) how to yield more on 3 acres than on 10 acres.'
(Focus group participant, Samini, 2011)

Fieldwork also suggests that participants learned practical issues too, often about farming techniques, by taking part in PADev workshops. By learning from peers and community members who have diverse cultural practices and techniques and have been exposed to different interventions, PADev participants obtained knowledge regarding other ways of farming and new crops. Beneficiaries mentioned gaining insights into tree planting, composting methods and livestock management from the PADev workshops they attended. These developments can be categorised as examples of interpersonal change processes on a cognitive level. In addition, findings indicate that, having absorbed this knowledge, community members would ask their peers or NGO representatives for more information and advice regarding specific techniques, which prompted behavioural change processes and encouraged them to adopt alternative farm practices.

Collective problem-solving and community support groups

'We learned (how important it is) to meet and write things down. Now when we have a meeting, I ask one of my children who is at school to write things down for me.'
(Focus group participant, Gbangu, 2011)

Another interesting issue that emerged during fieldwork was that people were keener on discussing matters collectively or solving problems within their communities after having taken part in PADev exercises. They mentioned that the number of community meetings had increased and some communities had also become more 'inclusive' as men and women met together more regularly. *'It has led to empowerment because the outcome of that (PADev) meeting made us form groups that now work'*, claimed one respondent.

'(After PADev) we have formed social groups and help each other when we are in need. (For example we learned) that adult health is important and (now) we meet and do check-ups.'
(Focus group participant, Wundua, 2011)

Field data also indicated that local support groups were formed in various communities as a result of PADev. For example, women in Wundua village formed a health check-up group after talking about health-related interventions at their PADev workshop. Community meetings and support groups are exam-

ples of collective and inter-personal behavioural change processes as a result of participating in PADev.



Community meeting in Kasapa, East Mamprusi, Ghana
Photo: Zjos Vlamincq (2011)

It should, however, be noted that the processes behind these behavioural changes need to be examined more rigorously to verify the statements made above. These examples emerged as a result of focus-group discussions with PADev participants but, based on this data alone, it cannot be concluded that PADev workshops increase the number of community meetings or community support groups. A larger sample size and more in-depth research into the mechanisms underlying these processes are required before such conclusions can be drawn. Based on the fieldwork conducted, preliminary signs of progressive change processes were indeed noted and are therefore worth mentioning here.

Community Action Plans (CAPs): Putting knowledge into practice

'PADev is in fact very useful. It lets us know what we (the district assembly) should be doing but because of the costs and high demand we cannot.'
(Interview district assembly official, Gambaga, 2011)

The last change process emerging from the focus groups and interviews was initiated by the dissemination of PADev reports in some of the communities being studied and is therefore categorised as a result-based change. PADev reports show the evaluation findings and indicate, among other things, the sectors where there are excessive numbers of projects, niches of development agencies as well as omissions in communities' development frameworks. This information can provide valuable input for future community action plans (CAPs), which is important in Ghana's four-tier decentralized system because it can inform the medium-term development plan (MTDP) that is drafted by the district assemblies.

Figure 1 Example of PAdev data: Number of projects per agency type based on Langbinsi Workshop 2008

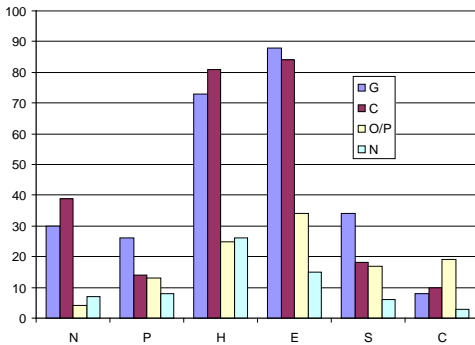


Table derived from: Tracking Local Development, ERG Meeting, UvA, 12 February 2009

Explanatory note: The vertical ax shows the number of intervention per agency type: G=Governmental, C= Christian, O/P=Other/Private, N= Non-Governmental. The horizontal ax shows the domains in which interventions took place: N= Natural, P=Physical, H=Human, E=Economical, S=Social, C=Cultural.

Yet respondents mentioned that both the unit committees and the district assemblies lack the human, financial and administrative resources to fulfil their responsibilities. In their opinion, PAdev could help relieve some of the pressure that now rests on the unit committees' shoulders as a three-day workshop would enable them to obtain a holistic idea of the problems that need to be prioritized by the communities and who would be best suited to carry out certain tasks, i.e. the government, NGOs or local community members. Research suggests that some communities have already implemented relevant PAdev findings in their CAPs. Community leaders in Wundua village have, for example, started to use PAdev insights when drawing up their CAP and the Chief of Gbangu village said that PAdev information 'will certainly be used for the CAPs', adding: 'I will gather (the elders) and together discuss (the findings) and try to find issues that need to be worked on'.



The Chief of Wundua, a participant in the PAdev workshops in Langbinsi, Ghana

Photo: Kees van der Geest (2012)

Conclusion

This Infosheet summarizes the change processes that participatory beneficiary-centred evaluations have been seen to initiate amongst local community members. Examining the cognitive and behavioural dynamics, at the level of beneficiaries of development projects that were sparked by their participation in PAdev evaluation exercises, has demonstrated how transformational such evaluations can be. The findings suggest that beneficiaries generally perceived using evaluation findings as important and they have actively implemented the knowledge they gained. In addition, PAdev workshops seem to have triggered local history writing, peer-learning activities and the formation of community groups. The PAdev reports have also offered valuable input for CAPs in some communities, thanks, in part, to their holistic and historical nature. Those evaluating development projects should be very aware of the unintended influence of evaluations and their potential impact on the thinking and subsequent behaviour of beneficiaries themselves. Incorporating local change processes in the evaluation designs and increasing local knowledge ownership during the assessment exercises should be given increased attention by development agencies, donors and monitoring and evaluation officers. By doing so, evaluations, and particularly those adopting a beneficiary-centred participatory approach, could become more than yet another mechanism for extracting local knowledge and could instead contribute to local change processes, such as the enhancement of downward accountability and the empowerment of beneficiaries, and, as a result, the effectiveness of development initiatives.

Contact information

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Additional Information

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