

# Subjective truths

The starting point for development evaluations should be how the recipients of development assistance experience change, rather than the set perspectives of the evaluators. The participatory development assessment methodology is designed to involve recipients in evaluations.

In the social sciences and humanities, the positivist assumption of objectivity in the process of knowledge creation is gradually being abandoned. Researchers no longer claim to have the monopoly on what is ‘true’ and what is ‘false’. The attention that is given to indigenous knowledge is growing, and a range of new methodologies that borrow elements from a variety of evaluation approaches, are now being developed to formulate hypotheses and test assumptions.

Philosopher Karl Popper’s theory of ‘three worlds of knowledge’ is gradually being replaced by more complex combinations of knowledge systems. Making sense of current and recent history is a subjective, value-driven activity, both for lay people and scientists. Back in 1928, the sociologist William Thomas formulated a theorem, which states that ‘if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’. His proposition has become popular among postmodern movements within the social sciences and humanities. Judging what is true or false, good or bad, useful or useless, beautiful or ugly, is a cultural process, bound and full of specific pathways through time and space.

All words and concepts are value-laden, and understanding them requires constant interpretation and reinterpretation. ‘Development’ has become a vague concept, and ‘evaluating development’ has become an exercise in judging norms and values. It is therefore useful to examine how subjectivity entered the debate on evaluating development, and how it has gained in popularity among researchers. In this article we look at the promise of involving recipients in the assessment of the effects and impacts of the development assistance they have received. We also examine the current shift from ‘livelihoods’ to ‘well-being’ approaches, and the growing interest in ‘deep democracy’, and what these could mean for evaluation practice.

### Evaluating development

The development industry is probably one of the most evaluated professional fields. Evaluations primarily involve project and programme assessments, and are undertaken by

a host of researchers and consultants. More comprehensive evaluations assess the impacts of development interventions on particular sectors such as education or water supply and sanitation within a country or region, or of development approaches such as microfinance.

### Participation in development evaluations

Among development and evaluation practitioners, ‘stakeholders’ participation’ has become a key phrase. Robert Chambers of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK, has led the way in increasing the attention given to the poor in development and evaluation approaches. Evaluations have thus shifted away from purely ‘technocratic’ and expert-oriented towards stakeholder-inclusive and participatory assessments. By the 1990s, participatory approaches had become accepted practice, at least on paper. But some observers began to question how they were being applied, and especially the lack of attention paid to power structures. This successful concept became blurred by many alternative interpretations and strayed from the original intention. The same happened with the overarching concept of ‘participation’.

This article describes a participatory development assessment (PDA) methodology developed by a team of researchers from the Netherlands, Ghana and Burkina Faso in an attempt to develop a more convincing approach to participatory evaluation.

### The PDA approach

Unlike many other development evaluation methods, where the starting point is a project, programme or sector, PDA is an ‘upside-down’ or reverse approach. It seeks to draw out >

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the collective 'experience of change' by the population of an area, and the total set of interventions, including those regarded as 'development initiatives', that people think have played a role in that change. In these assessments, it is not the expert evaluators who assess the change or the effectiveness of development initiatives, but representatives of the local population. Although outside experts organize and facilitate workshops where local people can take stock of their experiences and assist in analyzing the findings, PDA is intended to be a self-help evaluation tool that can be used by any local agency.


During the workshops, the participants share their subjective understanding and judgements of development initiatives and their impacts on the process of change in their communities. Three types of 'research area' are examined: those where funding agencies have been active in the past and are continuing their assistance to the local communities in the future; those where funding agencies have been active and have recently stopped their assistance to communities in the area; and those where no funding agencies have been active in the past.

The research team has recently tested the PDA approach in northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso. Typical research areas are neighbourhoods in and around small administrative centres, with between 20,000 and 50,000 inhabitants spread over several villages. Workshops in a particular research area bring together approximately 60 people. These include 10–15 'officials' representing local government departments, NGOs, chiefs and religious and social leaders, as well as 45–50 people from the villages, with a balanced representation of young and old, male and female, literate and illiterate, and socio-cultural groups such as faith-based communities. The intention is to gather a diverse group of people from the research area and to work with them in various subgroups that reach in-depth judgements of

the changes they have experienced. Later, the judgements of these different groups can be compared – for example, those of men versus women, officials versus villagers, old versus young – and any differences in opinion can be further explored during workshop sessions.

### Workshop agenda

A PDA workshop takes place over three days. During the first day the participants present and discuss their own development stories, in separate groups of relatively old and relatively young women, and of relatively old and relatively young men. Local officials take part in these discussions, often in the group of relatively old men.

Following Anthony Bebbington's useful approach,  the participants discuss the changes they have experienced in six 'domains' of their lives: in the natural environment; the physical environment; human capabilities (education, health); economic facilities; social capabilities; and cultural institutions. For each of these domains, the participants compare their current situation with that of their fathers or mothers when they were the same age. Thus the groups articulate the changes that have taken place over the past 25–30 years. They assess the changes as 'positive' or 'negative', and then qualify them by adding negative aspects of the changes they considered to be positive, and vice versa. Once they have concluded these assessments, the groups list the most important events over the last three decades.

The groups continue to discuss their perceptions of wealth and the attributes typical of the research area that determine whether someone is considered to be very rich, rich, average, poor or very poor. In addition, the participants are asked to fill in a questionnaire with questions about themselves, their parents, siblings and children. Their responses can be used as additional material that can be compared with those of their next of kin. The participants

### Evaluation

According to the American Evaluation Association, evaluation involves assessing the strengths and weaknesses of programmes, policies, personnel, products and organizations to improve their effectiveness. The evaluation industry assesses effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability, and sometimes also 'policy relevance': the relationship between formulated goals with overall policies or 'development strategies'.

Effectiveness refers to the realization of goals or aims. Efficiency relates to the cost-effectiveness, results compared with inputs – money, time and energy. Sustainability has to do with long-term continuation of intended results. In the language of evaluation, a 'logical order' is generally presented, starting with *output*, followed by *effect* or *outcome*, and ending with *impact*. For example, if the goal is to build a primary school, the *output* is the school itself (and the quality of its physical structure); the *effect* or *outcome* is the increased number of children attending school and the improvements in the quality of their learning; and the *impact* is a society in which better educated people

contribute to economic and social improvements and have 'better lives'. To be able to evaluate this change, a baseline is needed – a period of time for which data exist that can be used for before and after comparison.

The root of the word 'evaluation' is *value*. It is never the intention of development initiatives or of evaluators assessing the results of these initiatives simply to bring about or measure change. It is always the intention to bring about 'positive change', but what is considered 'positive' is usually left to interpretation. Many agencies now apply so-called 'logical frameworks' for 'outcome mapping' or 'results-based management', in which they specify the baseline, the aims, the steps and the intended results (often in the sequence of output, outcome/effect and impact). There is an ever-growing focus on local contexts, as agencies increasingly see their development initiatives as catalysts for positive change, of which the results very much depend on wider societal dynamics. A major problem with many evaluations is the attribution of results to the actual development initiative or intervention.



*Participatory planning: African villagers make their own development plan using a self-made map of their area.*

complete these questionnaires over the three days of the workshop. Those who can't are helped by those who can.

On the second day, the participants work in separate groups. The local officials form one group so that they can express their views without influencing the villagers. The other participants are split up into three to five subgroups. The day begins with a stocktaking of all development initiatives that have been launched in the area over the past 30 years. The participants list the name of the initiative, the sector in which it operated, the initiating agency or agencies, the financial donor(s), the period during which it was 'active', and other details. The initiating agencies include government agencies, faith-based and other NGOs, private sector agencies (such as banks or telecom companies) and local private initiatives.

After this stocktaking, the groups are split into male and female subgroups that then assign values to each 'project' ('intervention' or, better, 'initiative'). First they rank the projects on the basis of their usefulness and the impact they have had on peoples' lives. Each initiative is then assigned to one of five categories:

- relatively new and still too early to say anything certain about impact;
- very much disliked and should never have been launched;
- looked good on paper but produced very few outputs, or had a negligible impact;
- some visible or tangible outputs, but not sustainable; and
- lasting positive impact ('successful initiatives, also in the medium and long term').

The groups could further differentiate those initiatives that have had a lasting positive impact into those that reached many people, and those that affected the lives of only a few.

On the third day, the subgroups select the five 'best' and five 'worst' initiatives from the list they compiled the previous day. For each of the five best initiatives they decide which wealth class benefited the most and which the least. In the most recent workshops, the participants also tried to

attach values to the distribution of benefits immediately after a 'project' had ended. By repeating the exercise in the future, it should be possible to compare any shift in opinion about a successful initiative over time.

### **The PDA research: initial results**

The initial results of three of the six PDA evaluations held to date are now available, and have been sent to the communities in Ghana and Burkina Faso who participated in the workshops. In the following we provide a few highlights, focusing on the workshop held in the village of Sandema in northern Ghana.

The assessment of perceived 'changes' in Sandema revealed a rich diversity of opinions and attitudes. This reflected a multitude of subjective views of the changes that have occurred as mixtures of 'good' and 'bad'. However, underlying this diverse spectrum of opinions some clear general features can be identified. Differences in opinion are apparent between men and women, between old and young, and across village communities. Assigning values to the impacts of change involves a process of negotiation among many people who occupy different positions in society. For individuals as well as for groups, this often results in 'yes, but ...' responses in the case of changes that are valued as mostly positive, and 'no, although ...' responses in the case of changes that are judged as mostly negative. There is a strong cultural component in assigning values, and a historical path-dependency in judgements. People tend to judge certain changes in the context of their own experiences, or those of their ancestors. It is not always clear what is fact, fiction or myth.

But, as Thomas's theorem states, what is important is that people's opinions and behaviours are based on these mixtures of what they regard as relevant truths, even if these

*Continued on page 31* ➤