

Fearful Symmetry:
Correcting Geographic and Methodological Asymmetries
in Development Evaluation

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Prepared for the Symposium on Rethinking Development Evaluation, Sponsored by
the International Development Evaluation Association, Gland, July 26-27, 2004.

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² I am grateful to Sulley Gariba, Nancy MacPherson and Nicoletta Stame, and their colleagues on the IDEAS Board, for the invitation to prepare this paper, though none bears any responsibility for the arguments advanced here.

Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

William Blake

Introduction

What asymmetries characterize contemporary development evaluation, why are they problematic, and what can be done to correct them? This paper offers some answers to these questions, and challenges the field to take bold action.

Why Asymmetries Persist

It is no secret that asymmetries lurk everywhere in development evaluation. While these asymmetries appear to be primarily geographic and methodological in nature, they are, at bottom rooted in inequitable relations of money, power and knowledge. The real question, however, is why we permit these asymmetries to persist. We know they are usually wrong and mostly ineffective; they are often stunningly unjust. Is it fear of change? Is it fear of losing privilege? Is it raw self-interest? It is probably some combination of these reasons that sustains the inequalities, excesses and deprivations in our field. But we can do better than this. *We are* better than this. *We must* be better.

Recent Gains

To be sure, it is not all bad news. The past five years have seen positive movement on a number of issues in development evaluation. For one thing, most bilaterals and multilaterals have placed results-based performance-assessment closer to the centre of their evaluation practices, and in the process developing a shared evaluation lexicon. For another, participatory methods of evaluation and monitoring and social accountability—from PRA tools to community scorecards—have been mainstreamed, through the leadership of champions at the World Bank, the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex, Participatory Research in Asia and other organizations (see Jackson, 2000; Gariba, 2003). For its part, the International Development Research Centre has supported new tools for institutional self-assessment. The Bank's Operations Evaluation Department has encouraged productive ways of blending quantitative and qualitative methods in measuring poverty-reduction interventions. The Bank, UNDP and other donors have supported evaluation capacity development (ECD) in a number of developing countries. Since 2001, with Carleton University and several bilaterals, the Bank has offered the International Program for Development Evaluation Training to some 475 professionals from 60 countries. Moreover, the Bank, The Netherlands, and DFID, together with engaged practitioners and others, have incubated the IDEAS organization itself—an important gain for the field, indeed.

As important and impressive as these gains are, as diligent as donors have been in listening to Southern voices, and as much as these gains advance accountability and (let's say it clearly) democracy in development, these achievements have been largely Northern-driven and -controlled. The asymmetrical arrangements of money, power and knowledge that maintain

Northern privilege—rather, Northern *hegemony*—over the South in the development evaluation enterprise have not been fundamentally challenged or reformed during this period of innovation.

That work still needs to be done. Who will do it? The most likely “coalition of the committed” would involve leading Southern evaluation practitioners, major Southern and Northern NGOs and research institutes, emerging economic powers (India, China, Brazil, South Africa) and middle-power donors (the Nordics, The Netherlands, perhaps Canada) (see Williams et al, 2003).

Six Important Asymmetries: Geographic and Methodological

There are many asymmetries in the field of development evaluation, but six appear to be especially deserving of attention--and correction. They include two geographic asymmetries: North over South (designated here as GA1) and centre over periphery (GA2). This group also includes four methodological asymmetries: aid over trade (MA1), aid over domestic budgets (MA2), state over civil society (MA3), and disbursements over outcomes (MA4). These asymmetries are thoroughgoing and decisive in shaping the field, and in defining its limitations.

GA1: North Over South

This is the mother of all asymmetries, the defining feature of inequality within the field of development evaluation. Essentially, the majority of resources, contracts, ideas and even publications on evaluation and monitoring emanates from donor agencies, bilateral and multilateral, controlled by Northern governments. This makes perfect sense in terms of where power and money reside in the aid system. But it makes no sense whatsoever in terms of effectiveness, efficiency or fairness.

Even in some of our most important innovations, this asymmetry prevails. Consider the fact that only one out of 35 IPDET instructors this year is a Southerner (and this is the best ratio the program has posted in four years of operation). There is no excuse in 2004 for such extreme geographic bias. There are dozens of world-class Southern evaluation specialists who could serve as superb instructors. They only need be asked.

Juxtaposed to the base-level reality that skilled Southerners almost always know much more about the realities of poverty, and their prospects for transformation, in their home countries than their Northern peers, is the fact that Southerners, of course, work more cheaply than Northerners. From a value-of-knowledge-per-dollar point of view, if you will, salary and fee asymmetries are supremely illogical. Northern taxpayers actually get better value for money using experienced Southerners to evaluate publicly funded interventions than using experienced Northerners. So, for that matter, do Southern payers of taxes and user fees.

Moreover, there is a strong case to be made that procurement policies that tie the purchase of evaluation consulting services to Northern suppliers constitute systemic racism in the global knowledge system. You're either going global or your not. You're either implementing local ownership of development policies or you're not. There is no way around this. Untying aid is the first key step to freeing up procurement of evaluation services from Southern suppliers. And untied procurement will be much less expensive than current practices.

GA2: Centre Over Periphery

It would seem that the trajectory in recent years of ODA agencies toward policy and program-based approaches, pooled funding, local ownership and direct budget support has worked to strengthen the position not only of the governments of developing countries in general, but of their *central* governments in particular. This is not surprising. There is great leverage for Ministries of Finance and other central agencies in negotiating and implementing PRSPs. (Within the centre itself, the new architecture of aid appears to strengthen the position of the Executive branch of government and subordinate the legislative branch, or Parliament). Likewise, SWAPs strengthen the position of the central offices of sector Ministries. For the most part, efforts to decentralize aid-funded policy and program interventions have been partial and ad hoc. Sub-national levels of government have little real power to shape these processes, but must implement programs defined at the centre with the quantum of resources deemed adequate by the centre. Poor rural provinces are especially vulnerable to central-agency power grabs. To adapt Chambers (1997), these arrangements, yet again, put the first first. Such asymmetries translate into centrally-defined and -managed evaluation processes, with central-agency and donor officials in capital cities joining forces to drive the evaluation process. Even robust PME methods that amplify the voices of the poor have a difficult time neutralizing the dominance of the centre in such circumstances.

MA1: Aid Over Trade

Development evaluation privileges aid over trade. This is not surprising, but it *is* a problem. Development evaluation was “born” in the international development enterprise, and its growth has been nurtured by donors, consultants and other aid stakeholders. However, globalization and its freer flow of goods, services and capital have meant that, in almost every poor country, trade has eclipsed aid as the prime foreign-related engine of economic growth and poverty reduction (North-South Institute, 2004). (Many elements of globalization, such as the grip on intellectual property rights asserted by multinational corporations, serve to further strengthen Northern economic power). Indeed, business and employment growth of all types are top priorities of developing country governments of every political stripe. Development evaluation should get ready for prime time. It should assess the impacts of the combined forces of the market *and* development assistance. In evaluating trade, DE should extensively engage the private sector, especially multinational and leading domestic companies. Accountability methods arising out of the growing fields of corporate governance, corporate social responsibility (see Leipziger, 2003; Zadek, 2001; Zadek et al, 1997), socially and environmentally responsible investing, and fair trade should be used by DE practitioners in assessing trade’s contribution to poverty reduction and sustainable development.

MA 2: Aid Over Domestic Budgets

A related asymmetry is the privileging of aid funds over domestic budgets. The multi-donor “juggernaut” of the PRSP or SWAP can swamp, displace, dislocate and subordinate funds from a domestic budget more severely than single-donor projects have done in the past. Even worse, when governments base their plans on expected levels of budget support through grants and loans from external agencies, and donors fail to deliver the quantum or speed of financial flows they originally promised, governments pay not only a programmatic price but also a

political one. The overall result of these dysfunctional dynamics is to weaken the South vis a vis the North even while at the same time weakening the government vis a vis its citizens.

MA3: The State Over Civil Society

Recent years have witnessed a strengthening in development assistance, and accordingly, in development evaluation, of the role of the state. PRSPs, SWAPs and other forms of program-based and pooled aid strategies channel funds directly to developing-country government budgets. While there certainly is a constituency inside and outside donor agencies and governments for a stronger role for civil society in the evaluation process, much of the effort has channelled Southern NGO policy advocacy and participation into monitoring government service-delivery. This is too limited a role. CSOs should be active on a full range of issues. They are not adjuncts to governments; they should be independent members of a distinct and essential sector. DE should be confident enough to break free of its government bias. Development evaluation should invest heavily in, and permit itself to be *shaped by*, CSO evaluation strategies and methods—and content. Some of the most promising innovations seek to measure the social and economic value created by nonprofits and social enterprise (Emerson, 2003; Quarter et al, 2003).

MA4: Disbursements Over Outcomes

This asymmetry is the weakest of the six. That is, it is more possible to change it fairly quickly. But, the fact is, in development evaluation, client concerns over disbursements still generally trump concerns over outcomes. This is counter-intuitive, given all the attention in public management everywhere devoted to results-based management and performance measurement. But implementing RBM and PM is proving to be more complex and time-consuming than anticipated a few years ago—though, perhaps agencies and evaluators are creating this problem themselves. Ultimately, the whole point of RBM is operational flexibility in order to focus resources and effort on achieving results. The point is *not* to get the worst of both worlds: rigid and cumbersome planning and reporting along with the high expectations associated with results discourse. In fact, there are very thoughtful and practical solutions to setting reasonable performance expectations and effectively telling performance stories (Mayne, 2004). Some sub-fields, such as microfinance, have developed international comparative indicators and performance benchmarks (ADB, 2003; Jackson, 2002). There are, therefore, ways and means of transforming this asymmetry sooner rather than later.

Correcting the Asymmetries: Posing Questions About Change

Certainly, these asymmetries are entrenched and the interests supporting them influential and well-resourced. At the same time, though, there are, dialectically, certain counter-forces that could be leveraged to advance change. Among these various trends are: broad-based and intense interest by Northern taxpayers in both value for money and integrity in aid spending; movements among some OECD donors toward untying ODA implementation funds (see Williams et al, 2003); the growing influence and resources of the emerging economic powers of China, India, Brazil, South Africa and other countries; increased media freedom in some countries in exposing corruption when it occurs in all sectors; the global spread and momentum of corporate social responsibility, energized by consumers, employees and investors; and

methodological innovations in measuring the social performance of companies, assessing the value-added generated by CSOs and holding governments accountable for social expenditures.

In this regard, a number of practical questions are worth posing on possible strategies to correct asymmetries in development evaluation. In particular, to what extent – and how – is it possible to:

- 1) Southernize and “civilize” (i.e. inject more civil society into) the governance and professional staffing of development evaluation’s innovations: IDEAS, IPDET, ECD initiatives and others?
- 2) Untie ODA evaluation funds? How can all donors be freed of the obligation to use Northern evaluators? How can donors mainstream the use of qualified Southern evaluators as their *prime* source of expertise?
- 3) Implement a transition plan for downsizing the pool of Northern evaluators, to capitalize on this rich knowledge base and to assist them in diversifying their markets, especially in the North itself?
- 4) Establish independent poverty-reduction evaluation panels based in Southern countries, with appointees drawn from the state, civil society, business, and the academic/research community?
- 5) Incorporate a strong presence of and voice for civil society into poverty-reduction evaluations?
- 6) Incorporate the integrated assessment of business and trade impacts into poverty-reduction evaluations?
- 7) Deal progressive business actors into development evaluation structures and processes?
- 8) Build Southern capacity in evaluation methods related to RBM, PME, gender equality, CSO value-added, CSR and other diverse approaches?
- 9) Set up pooled national funds at arm’s length from government to enable communities and regions to engage their own evaluators to assess government service delivery for poverty reduction?
- 10) Train local government officials, in particular, to interface productively with results-oriented and citizen-driven evaluation processes?

This is an initial list. The ultimate question is whether Northern players, especially, have the courage to answer and then take action on these questions. Will we face our fear of symmetry?

Implications for the Field

Obviously, such future directions carry important implications for the field. Some implications are strategic. That is, if this is the general path agreed upon, then IDEAS, in particular, needs to animate a broader debate about why and how the field should and can make this transition. Some implications are more tactical. We need to find champions inside donor agencies, perhaps starting with DFID, the Nordics and other smaller players. The transition will be easier if Northern evaluators find other (non-ODA) productive uses of their time; finding (or creating) new markets for their services must be a priority. In general, however, the leaders and members of the development evaluation field must help each other understand fully what this direction means. It will not be simple or easy. But it will result in a stronger, fairer, more efficient and more effective field of practice.

Conclusion

Are the groups now privileged in development evaluation afraid of correcting the asymmetries that hold the field back from full evolution and efficiency? Are those presently subordinated by these asymmetries ready to share power, and then assume majority control? It is time to make the shift. It is time to summon the courage to face our fear. It is time to move forward with solutions for positive change. Quite simply, it is time.

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