“Participatory Evaluation:
A two-way learning process”

Prepared By:

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Procurement Assistant at "Social Protection Initiative
Project between World Bank and the Government of Egypt

Abstract

In the field of international development, the term “Evaluation” has always carried a considerable sense of higher authority. Conventionally, evaluation has been always viewed as a donor centered process with a top-down approach. Today, where participation is becoming a key word in the world of international development and policymaking, participatory evaluation is gaining greater potential and is being adopted by key international development organizations. Participatory evaluation engages stakeholders and target beneficiaries in assessing projects and programs which they are part of. There are many agencies and organizations that are still skeptical of the soundness of participatory evaluation for lacking the element of objectivity and the absence of technical capacity in developing countries for generating measurable tools and standards for evaluation. However, the positive aspects and long term benefits of this approach surpasses its short term weaknesses: building the capacity for self-governance of civil society and governments of developing counties, increasing their sense of ownership and enthusiasm to cooperate, empowerment of civil society, informing development expertise of what works and what doesn’t work in different cultures and environments which they are not familiar with, producing realistic evaluation reports based on the integrated views of the different partners of the projects, and most importantly provides valuable lessons for future projects.
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In the field of international development, the term “Evaluation” has always carried a considerable sense of higher authority. Conventionally, evaluation has been always viewed as a donor centered process with a top-down approach. Today, where participation is becoming a key word in the world of international development and policymaking, participatory evaluation is gaining greater potential and is being adopted by key international development organizations. Participatory evaluation engages stakeholders and target beneficiaries in assessing projects and programs which they are part of. There are many agencies and organizations that are still skeptical of the soundness of participatory evaluation for lacking the element of objectivity and the absence of technical capacity in developing countries for generating measurable tools and standards for evaluation. However, the positive aspects and long term benefits of this approach surpasses its short term weaknesses: building the capacity for self-governance of civil society and governments of developing counties, increasing their sense of ownership and enthusiasm to cooperate, empowerment of civil society, informing development expertise of what works and what doesn’t work in different cultures and environments which they are not familiar with, producing realistic evaluation reports based on the integrated views of the different partners of the projects, and most importantly provides valuable lessons for future projects.  

• Conventional Evaluation versus Participatory Evaluation:  
Leading organizations are currently moving away from the top-down approaches of development towards adopting a participatory and bottom-up approach, they have thus started to include this approach into their various fields of development including evaluation. New methods of evaluation
which attempt to include all the partners and stakeholders of the projects as well as broadly engaging people through a variety of new methods for assessing the different effects of the projects other than their intended objective are beginning to be recognized. The most popular of which are: Participatory Impact Assessment (PIA) Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Self-Esteem, Associative strength, Resourcefulness, Action Planning, and Responsibility for Follow-through (SARAR), and Beneficiaries Assessment (BA)\(^1\). These approaches are still in their primary and experimental stages. Although they have several positive sides, they cannot stand alone as the sole source of evaluation; there are still some areas that need to be developed and refined in order to come out with a sound evaluation strategy. They should also be integrated with elements of the conventional evaluation methods in order to optimize the results and have a more reliable reflection of the situation.

The top-down-donor-centered approach of evaluation has been adopted for many years. This method of evaluation was based upon the viewpoint of evaluation expertise who build their views upon reports prepared by external evaluation consultants in addition to the periodical reports prepared by the management units of projects. The criteria against which these evaluations were prepared were based on the standards developed by development officials who are not usually familiar with the different conditions, environment, and culture of the people of the projects. Their views were heavily built upon written reports and short missions that could not allow for a real grasp of the situation. This approach was thought to be the most convenient because of:

\(^1\) Rietbergen-McCracken, Jennifer, Narayan Deepa Participation and Social Assessment: Tools and
The objectivity of the evaluator
- The experience of the evaluation specialists and consultants and their ability to develop measurable tools and indicators
- The ability to deal with sophisticated methods of quantitative analysis
- The lack of capacity of people and governments in developing countries for evaluation.

However, due to the increased criticism of the unrealistic nature of those evaluations and the low level of precision in reflecting the comprehensive actual impact of the projects, it became very important to develop a more realistic and more convincing method that would include the people affected by the project in the process of monitoring and evaluation.

Case Study:

An evaluation of Information systems infrastructure Development for the Egyptian Local Administration System (EGY/98/001/01/NEX) prepared for the Operational Unit for Development Services/Cairo and United Nation Development Program/ Cairo

The project evaluated is part of a program launched in 1988 by the Egyptian Government to provide different Governorates in Egypt with information systems as well as skilled personnel in information technology. As part of this program, the project evaluated hereby has started on 1998.
with the purpose of linking the Governorates together through a nation wide information network.

According to the findings of the consultants who conducted the evaluation of the project, there is a great difficulty in differentiating between the output of this specific project and the program that it is considered part of. The other problem lies in the documentation of the project itself where immediate objectives and outputs are not specific and the success criteria and deliverables of the project were not initially identified in clear or measurable way. Annual project Reports failed as well to reflect the specific achievements of the project and identify their connection of the immediate objectives and intended outputs. These problems made the task of evaluating the whole project very difficult.

As a result of all the previously mentioned pertaining problems the evaluating consultants recommended the preparation of a second phase of the project that meets the standards of recent project proposal that has specific objectives and outputs with measurable success criteria and deliverables. The second phase should take into consideration sustainability and update of technologies and make periodic evaluation reflecting the relation between the achievements and the stated objectives and deliverables of the project.

From the brief description of this project and its evaluation, it is clear that the ability of producing a realistic and informative evaluation report is highly dependent on the way in which the project was initially designed and how the project objectives and deliverables were determined and specified. In this respect, projects
that are designed as fixed blueprints can hardly be evaluated in any other way than the conventional methods of top-down evaluation where there is no room for engaging people affected by the project in the process of evaluation. In this case, evaluation reports may not be adequate as they only relate to the initial project design with no regard to the views of the beneficiaries and stakeholders of the project. This problem is pertaining in all projects designed in conventional top-down blue print proposals. On the other hand, projects that were initially designed using bottom-up approach allows the use of participatory evaluation methods which are more realistic and far more easier in reflecting the actual results of the project.

In this respect, participatory evaluation is a useful mean for success of development project. However, it should also be regarded, as an end on its own right where people affect by development project should have the right of voicing their own opinion about the projects they get affected by. Goulet (1995) addresses participation from the perspective of deprofessionalization in all aspects of life from planning, to providing services, basic needs and providing infrastructure. He considers the movement towards participation in development in general as an outcome of the redemocratization movement that occurred recently in Asia, Latin America and Central Europe. Participation here is certainly an end where Goulet relates the principle of participation leading to more equitable aid to the new demand for political freedom. In this regard, calling for democracy includes a demand for more non-elite participation approaches in development, where top-down approaches to development is one form of dictatorship rejected by advocates of democracy. On the other hand, Goulet’s
reference to participation as a more efficient tool for development than that of the bottom-up approach, also indicates the importance of perceiving it as a means to more effective development and not only as an end being a major component of democratization.

- Advantages of Participatory Evaluation for Civil Society, Stakeholders and target beneficiaries:

  Participation in development projects cannot be confined to one or two phases of the project. It must take place throughout the different stages not only because it is important for the reason that will be discussed shortly but as it was clear from the case study from Egypt that it is not possible to apply partial participatory methods where a project designed initially as a blue print with a top-down approach cannot be evaluated using participatory methods and vise versa. Thus, participation should be applied through the different procedures of the project especially evaluation.

  Participatory evaluation is a very useful tool for assessing the impact of development project on the people themselves and how far the project has succeeded or failed in improving beneficiaries with respect to the project intended objectives. Although development experts and evaluation consultants may have a wide experience in assessing the situation, no one can actually sense the impact of any change as those directly affected by the project. On one hand, giving beneficiaries the opportunity to voice their opinion in the evaluation gives them a sense of ownership and increases their concern about the
continuity of these projects. On the other hand, people become more appreciative of the effort and funds invested. In case the project has succeeded in fulfilling people’s needs, then involving them in the evaluation process make them realize the benefits they have reaped from supporting the project. While in case the project was not considered completely satisfactory people will have the chance of understanding what went wrong and the reasons behind deviating from the intended objectives which in return increases their sense of responsibility and willingness to correct for the problems that had occurred in the past.

Another important factor in participatory evaluation is the empowerment of civil society and people at the grass roots. Handing in people part of the responsibility of evaluation is a way of empowering them and enhancing their capability for self-governance and hence independence.

• **Advantages of Participatory Evaluation for Development Organizations and Policy Makers:**

Conventional evaluation has been viewed for a long time as the most efficient and less time consuming means of evaluation. However, practical experience shows that although participatory evaluation may take longer duration and larger amounts of funds, it has several other advantages over conventional evaluation. From the side of policy makers and development organizations, participatory evaluation reflect the actual reality of the project impact. Getting the people involved in the assessment of the project results is a very informative method through which decision makers can have a complete picture of the situation and have a better understanding of the impact of the changes they have introduced to the conditions or environment of a specific
group of people. Through the different participatory evaluation methods, development projects gain support from local people affected by project and make them more willing to cooperate with the changing agents. On the other hand, the inclusion of beneficiaries in evaluation allows decision makers to view the different aspects that has been affected by the project which may have not been directly related to the intended objectives as in local culture, traditions and family ties. These aspects may have a magnificent effect on the lives of beneficiaries that cannot be understood by the local people themselves and that may be highly significant in their assessment of the impact of the project. Thus, the involvement of people affected by the project in the evaluation is a way of gaining more knowledge about the people targeted and allows decision makers to include lessons learned from these kinds of evaluation in future project and assist them in taking several different aspects into consideration during project design.

- **Guidelines for Participatory Evaluation:**

  As it has been explained, participatory evaluation has several advantages over conventional evaluation. However, this does not mean that views of experts and evaluation consultants can be disregarded. In contrast, there is a crucial need to integrate the experience of professional experts with those of target beneficiaries. On one hand, professional experts may have a better understanding of the long-term effects of certain changes, which may not be easily viewed by people at the grass root affect by the project. On the other hand, people at the grass root level, especially in developing and underdeveloped countries may lack the capabilities for evaluation, thus the support of
professional experts is highly needed to work closely with these people to build their capacity and assist them in conducting evaluations. Dependence on the views of beneficiaries alone cannot produce full accountable evaluations. Thus, the integration of the experience and measurable tools by professionals must complement the views and assessments of the target beneficiaries in order to have meaningful evaluation that can be used as useful lessons for future projects and also to help build the capacity of local people in evaluation and self governance.

- **Weak Points Facing Participatory Evaluation:**

  Although participatory approaches of evaluation are highly recommended they still suffer some problems. The first problem that may occur is the subjectivity of the assessment conducted by target beneficiaries. People gaining advantages through the project may tend to falsely reflect desired results in order keep the development funds flowing. This can be misleading and may cause harm to different other people negatively affected whether directly or indirectly by the project. In contrast, the personal interest of certain people may be affected by new policies introduced through the project; they thus tend to project a negative view in their evaluation although the project may have been benefiting several different people affected by the project. The second problem of participatory evaluation is that it requires long duration. Visiting areas of the project and conducting interviews with different people requires a long time in order to produce a meaningful evaluation which may not be desired by donors and funding agency as more time invested in evaluation entails higher cost. The third problem is the resistance that participatory evaluation may
face because it implies handing in part of the authority of the development professionals to local people. This threat may lead to the reluctance of governments, development organizations and decision-makers in supporting participatory methods. In his book “whose reality counts? Putting the first Last” Robert Chambers discusses the reasons that hindered the emergence of participatory methods for so long despite of all its advantages. He argues that the problem lies in the values, methods and behavior of outsider professionals that prevented them from learning and the belief of the superiority of their knowledge to those of local people. The problem is then stemming from the inability of outsider professionals to listen to others and enable them to express and share their views. Understanding Chambers’ analysis of the reasons that hindered and delayed the application of participatory approaches in development until the early nineties, illuminates our understanding of why participatory Evaluation is not yet fully applied in development projects.

The fourth problem is the miss choice of people assessing the projects where some groups of beneficiaries may have leaders that can prevent others from voicing their own opinion and use their influence to control other target groups’ views. The fifth and most important problem is the lack of capacity of local people in developing countries to conduct evaluation and lack of technical skills that allows them to understand the impact directly occurred as a result of the project. The last problem, which was specifically discussed through the case study discussed above, is that projects that are initially designed as blue prints using top-down approach can hardly be evaluated through participatory methods and thus in order to have
participatory evaluation, projects must be designed with the full involvement of beneficiaries through the different phases of the project beginning by needs assessment and appraisal up till evaluation.

- **Requirements for Sound Objective Participatory Evaluation:**

  There are several reasons behind the limitation of the use of participatory evaluation: there are very few programs targeting the capacity building for self-evaluation of local people, there is no integration between qualitative evaluation of locals and quantitative analysis of professionals at the higher levels of development organization, there is no utilization of lessons learnt from previous evaluations, many organization still view participatory evaluation as only a mean for more effective evaluation not as an end for empowerment and self-governance, and decentralization of the process of evaluation through participation is facing resistance from most of the development organizations. Thus in order to have participatory evaluation applied on a broader and well established level, several measures should be taken into consideration by both development professionals and academic scholars to address these problems. In this respect, development professionals should develop ways to support the capacity building of local people for evaluation, develop mechanisms for integrating useful elements of conventional evaluation methods with participatory methods in order to reach a comprehensive reliable evaluation results, involve evaluation experts in the process of capacity building local people and assure their role in this process in order to
reduce their resistance to the decentralization of evaluation process.

Another important factor in order for participatory evaluation to take place is transparency, where all stakeholders must have equal right to full and accessible information relevant to the project affecting them.

In this respect transparency is one of the important elements that must occur in order to achieve participation. According to Feeney (1998), transparency and availability of information is one of the prerequisites for participatory approaches. She criticizes how project documents are inaccessible to the local poor and most of the evaluation reports are still kept as confidential. This point opens the door to the question of how seriously participatory evaluations are taken into consideration by international organizations if most of the evaluation reports are kept away from the public and how in this case evaluation can be used as a tool for accountability.

• Conclusion:

The argument set forth in this paper has shown the importance of participation of all stakeholders affected by the project in the evaluation process. This necessity stems from the usefulness of this cooperation for all parties affected by the project. For Decision-makers, participatory evaluation reflects a realistic view of the impact of the changes they introduce through projects and provide them with meaningful lessons that should be considered in future projects. For civil society and target beneficiaries, participation increases their
confidence in the purpose of project objective and increases their sense of ownership over the project. The cooperation and integration of both parties in the evaluation of the project produces optimum results and reduces the feeling of imposed projects on target beneficiaries. The common benefit within this method is the capacity building for self-governance in developing countries. For donors, it assures the sustainability of the project and its continuation after the withdrawal of funds. For target beneficiaries, capacity building develops the needed skills for self-reliance and management of their own affairs, which increases their sense of responsibility and ownership over development projects. In this regard and as it was discussed earlier, participatory evaluation should be regarded as both as means and an end in itself.

Bibliography


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