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Unpacking Impact Assessment

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Evaluation Practices: A Continuing Evolution

Suraj Jacob and Rahul Mukhopadhyay

Social interventions are designed to change existing social conditions. It is therefore natural that those involved would want to calibrate inputs, outputs and outcomes. For example, the current policy discourse focuses on measuring teacher engagement (as inputs) and children's learning (as outcomes). The underlying assumption is that the two are linked causally. And yet interventions are sometimes designed and implemented without being attentive to *how* and *under what conditions* teacher engagement *actually changes* children's learning. In this context, evaluation can be understood as a set of practices examining how a social intervention unfolds and placing 'values' on different aspects of the intervention. This essay explores some of the assumptions underlying social interventions and surveys the important challenges to evaluation practices in Indian contexts and across the globe.

Evaluating design, implementation, and social consequences of a program

In its full scope, evaluation encompasses three interrelated aspects of a social intervention or program: its design, its implementation, and its consequences for society. Below, we briefly discuss each of these aspects.

The evaluation of design examines the justifications for intervening ('needs assessment') and the specific form of the program ('program choice') as well as the expected processes through which the program was meant to create changes in society ('theory of change'). Unfortunately, many real-world evaluations do not

systematically attend to program design. Programs are often off-the-shelf and guided by designers' skillsets, untested beliefs and (implicit) ideological orientations, and political compulsions of donors and others – and yet evaluations often ignore these matters. Instead, arguably, evaluations ought to connect program design with contextual relevance and evidence-based expectations of how and why the specifics of the program are likely to create positive changes in society.

In its full scope, evaluation encompasses three interrelated aspects of a social intervention or program: its design, its implementation, and its consequences for society.

Although evaluations often do not examine program design in depth, they typically do attend to program implementation. The evaluation of implementation has some commonalities with monitoring but in principle there is a clear distinction between them. Monitoring is in-house, continuous, focused on some key activity parameters linked to individual staff accountability, and identifies 'implementation gaps' so that program design can be tweaked in an effort to fix them.

By contrast, evaluation of implementation is done independently of implementers and is meant to understand more deeply why implementation gaps exist. However, in

reality the two are often not as distinct as the literature on ‘best practices’ would demand. In fact, often implementation evaluators only perform secondary analysis of monitoring data (which are increasingly routinized and digitalized through MIS, especially for larger programs).

This limits evaluation to implementation parameters that were set for a different purpose (in-house monitoring) and data forms that were created for a different purpose and limited by in-house capacities (simple quantitative indicators that can be gauged on a continuous basis). Importantly, this cannot get at the crucial ‘why’ questions around inevitable implementation gaps, which call for independent, qualitative and interpretive methods of inquiry.

At best, mainstream impact evaluation approaches merely take recourse to the theory of change to explain the ‘how’...

Another unfortunate consequence of implementation evaluation piggybacking on monitoring is that the quality of program activities stands relatively ignored. For instance, it is far easier to collect information on the number of community members who attend a gram sabha than to collect information on the quality of engagement in the gram sabha, although often the latter is crucial for program success.

Similarly, typically we collect information about the number of teachers who attend a professional development program but we may ignore information on the quality of the training or its ability to nudge teachers to make changes in classroom practices.

The third aspect of evaluation, namely understanding social consequences of interventions, has gained prominence in recent years through the consolidation of

statistical techniques to estimate ‘causal’ relationships between program outputs and social outcomes (‘impact evaluation’). Its importance lies in the clear focus accorded to the question “How effective is the program?” and its draw lies in the adoption of techniques that purportedly deliver clear answers to this question.

However, the method-centric nature of mainstream impact evaluation limits the focus to measuring impact rather than reflecting on what ‘being effective’ means. For instance, a program to encourage reading in schools may naturally measure consequent changes in language skills, but it is important to not close off inquiry into other consequences, especially longer term and relatively intangible ones. The reading program may influence students’ aspirations, their understanding of social relations, and their sense of personhood and identity.

Openness to interpreting impact becomes key in such situations. Further, by focusing on the question “How effective is the program?”, mainstream impact evaluation downplays the question “How is the program effective?”. The absent ‘how’ is particularly odd for an approach centred on causality. Mixed methods techniques such as ‘process tracing’ can address this by taking careful account of context and mechanisms (‘realist evaluation’) and the complex ways through which program activities may generate outcomes or fail to do so.

At best, mainstream impact evaluation approaches merely take recourse to the theory of change to explain the ‘how’, rather than problematize it by independently inquiring into the processes of empirical change. Indeed, it would be useful to compare the two, and to even superimpose an account of actual empirical processes over the corresponding theory of change. Such exercises could also improve decisions regarding program continuance and/or scaling up or down.

Orientations to evaluation: method, use, value

The above discussion takes us to the consideration of orientations to evaluation. It is useful to distinguish between broad orientations towards method, use and value. The first ('method') emphasizes research methodology, for instance experimental or quasi-experimental approaches to impact evaluation using statistical techniques.

The second orientation ('use') emphasizes how evaluation findings can loop back to making the program more effective. This often centres on actionable learnings from implementation evaluation, since in real world policymaking, decisions regarding continuance and/or scaling programs up or down are seldom based primarily on evaluation findings.

The third orientation ('value') emphasizes values in the process of evaluation itself.



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Values such as improved gender relations, environmental sensitivity or health equity can be built into evaluation even if the program being evaluated is not directly focused on gender, environment or health issues. Matters of culture, indigeneity and power relations can also be given special value in the process of evaluation.

Further, evaluators may focus on creating relationships of trust and reciprocity with program personnel and local populations, thereby acknowledging and proactively

addressing (even if only partially) their relatively privileged positions and countering asymmetric accountability relations (discussed below).

An overarching value is participation in evaluation. The need for participatory approaches that are effective in understanding design, implementation and impact, and are attentive to contextual specificities, has become increasingly evident in India and across the globe. Much of participatory evaluation derives from principles and methods of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and related techniques such as Participatory Learning and Action (PLA).

In the case of implementation and impact, participatory approaches can address problems of existing approaches through co-generation of output and impact indicators with relevant communities (including indicators of quality that are often otherwise missing), strengthening reliability of baseline information, and deepening emerging understanding of both program procedures (that is, activities connecting inputs with outputs) and impact processes (that is, translation of program outputs to social outcomes).

However, typically participatory evaluation in India has focused on data collection and triangulation and seldom on seriously involving communities in program design or analysis, either of implementation or impact. Just as importantly, in practice, participatory approaches typically do not include the feedback-loop stage, which is very much in the hands of donors, program designers and policymakers.

Despite all this, it is heartening that in recent years the *jan sunwai* has been used innovatively for participatory implementation, monitoring and evaluation, although it still falls short of implementation analysis. We emphasize the scope for expanding participation in different aspects of evaluation. Explicit procedures can generate

impact indicators identified by intended program beneficiaries. With expanding mobile phone usage, participants can use digital photography to articulate and explain the changes they have experienced from the intervention, and also expected changes that they believe have not been met.

It is important to note the demographic details based on which intervention experiences and responses could vary (for instance, gender, caste, class), and to account for them and to incorporate them into the evaluation plan. At the same time, participatory evaluation should be attentive to ‘structural violence’ in contexts with historical forms of embedded inequalities that have been reconfigured to take new forms today.

Evaluation should not ignore the implications of these inequalities and their changing nature, or how diverse institutional forms – including that of state and non-state actors – interact with these inequalities. Participatory approaches can also influence and democratize accountability relations around a program.

Sharing, dissemination and discussion of findings with communities could help to disrupt current chains of accountability routed back mainly to policymakers and donors. While development organizations are aware of this, the mind-sets of donors, consultants and evaluation agencies – who typically feel that accountability to donor investment supersedes community voices and accountability to communities – continue to dominate.

There is no gainsaying that the ecosystem of evaluation is driven by requirements of donor agencies hewing to the (quantitative) ‘methods orientation’ and to procrustean design features such as mechanical use of the logical framework (‘logframe’) template. Therefore, it is not surprising that

evaluation findings are often used to justify ‘effectiveness’ of programs without a critical inquiry into what worked and how, what did not work and why, and negative cases.

For field-level CSOs, in practice, evaluation is often limited to being another organizational procedure to fulfil or another hoop to jump through, rather than offering an opportunity to critically examine objectives, strategies, and program choices vis-à-vis objectives.

There are two other issues that also deserve attention. One, the often-absent final stage of the evaluation process where findings are shared with and validated by communities. Two, the need to share findings at different levels of the program hierarchy, in diverse ways that convey the findings in an appropriate manner to stakeholders at different levels.

That is, there could be more innovative efforts to present evaluation findings in accessible and useful ways to communities, program beneficiaries, field staff, regional offices, supra-regional offices, and donors. Such a balancing across the three orientations – method, use and value – is a difficult but worthy aspiration for all evaluators.

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Impact Assessment: Five lessons I have learnt

Dwithiya Raghavan

The first time I had to contend with impact assessment over 10 years ago, as the operations lead of an education services NGO, it was accompanied with a lot of apprehension and confusion. An independent, third party organization had been assigned by the donor to evaluate one of the programs we had been implementing for a year. The evaluation team would visit for three days, observe the program being delivered in schools, peruse documents, analyze any data we were able to provide on outcomes and then give the donor a report on the impact of our intervention on the children.

As soon as the stage of agreeing objectives has been completed, it is crucial to get field teams to internalize these as well. The staff who are in touch with the primary stakeholders and delivering the program interventions should always be guided by these objectives.

None of us knew what to expect or how to prepare or what data to share. But it was this experience that sparked my interest in the area of impact evaluations and in exploring how practitioners and implementing organizations can integrate this process into their operations and derive the maximum value from it. As I have learnt and grown, my understanding both from the perspective of

the evaluated and the evaluator, I share five key lessons that I have learnt.

Lesson 1: Think outcomes and measurement of impact from the design stage of the program

In the broadest sense, impact assessment intends to answer the question “Did the project meet its objective?” And the first step towards answering this question is to define the objective of the project as clearly as possible. The objective may also be thought of as the problem that one is trying to solve.

One of the challenges that I encountered repeatedly is that as well-intentioned practitioners who care about making a difference, we want to do too much in one program. I cannot stress how important it is to brainstorm with project teams and arrive at one or two objectives that are central to the program and put them into words clearly and concisely.

Once the objectives have been defined, we then need to nail down the project activities that help achieve these objectives and dedicate our time and attention to ensuring that these activities are delivered as planned.

A third important step in preparing for impact measurement is to articulate ‘who’ the program is intended for and make sure that the activities in the program are directed towards this group. Thinking about and taking these three aspects into account from the design stage not only prepares the organization for an evaluation, but also ensures that the goal is always in sight during implementation.

Lesson 2: Get your field teams oriented towards impact assessment in the early stages of implementation

As soon as the stage of collectively defining objectives has been completed, it is crucial to get field teams to internalize these as well. The staff who are in touch with the primary stakeholders, and delivering the program interventions, should always be guided by these objectives. Having a team at the core of the implementation who know what the expected outcomes of the project are, is invaluable both for the project's success and for the stakeholder experience. This is also a much more sustainable way of building impact thinking into the organization as a whole. A clued-in field team can provide timely information about the aspects of the program that are working well and those that don't seem to be.

Lesson 3: Monitor, measure and make changes

While impact assessment is often seen as an annual or end of program term event, what supports a good evaluation process is regular periodic monitoring of the implementation. Evaluation is typically concerned with the outcomes, but as practitioners we are well aware that if processes are not functioning optimally during all phases of implementation, the expected outcomes will not be achieved. In order to understand if the program is causing the stakeholders to move towards the intended objectives, periodic measurement of the primary outcome of interest is critical.

Program staff must have short term milestones that provide insights on the effectiveness of the intervention. Measurement is a critical part of impact assessment and I cannot stress enough how important it is to design the right tools to measure the specific outcomes of each project. Finally, measurement is only useful if we are learning from it, analyzing the

data we have collected, and making course corrections to ensure that we are moving towards the intended outcomes.

Lesson 4: Be open to programs not working as intended

When I was a staff member of an implementing organization, I often felt the need to prove to the external evaluators that the program is indeed achieving its objectives. Given that decisions of continuing funding, expanding or replicating a program are made on the basis of the impact the program is able to demonstrate, it is understandable that there is a great deal of pressure on practitioners during an evaluation.

While impact assessment is often seen as an annual or end of program term event, what supports a good evaluation process is regular periodic monitoring of the implementation.

Time and again, there is also a tendency to highlight isolated success stories from the program, while not paying attention to how the program has impacted the entire group of stakeholders. However, a good partnership with evaluators can assist in streamlining project activities, in identifying the areas where resources need to be allocated, and in sharpening the focus of the program to support the achievement of its objectives.

Lesson 5: The 'Why' is as important as the 'How much' in estimating impact

Increasingly in recent times, evaluations focus only on measuring whether or not the project had the intended impact on its stakeholders and quantifying the extent of change the program has been able to produce. The criticality of this data in an

impact assessment cannot be denied. But answers to the 'why' questions could help understand if the program can be chosen for a scale up, and what contextual factors have contributed or hindered the improvement of the outcome of interest.

Considering that impact assessments aim to establish causal relationships between intervention and the outcome of interest, we need to be aware of and record the other influences on the stakeholders of the project. While a strong quantitative measurement determines the extent to which the program has impacted the outcomes, qualitative data collected from stakeholders complete the puzzle by showing us the mechanisms that are operating to achieve this impact and also to get a sense of the unintended consequences of the program that we may not be measuring.

As I tried to consolidate my learnings from a decade long tryst with impact assessment, I became more convinced of its value for implementing organizations. With organizations wanting to solve problems with minimal resources at our disposal, impact orientation has the potential to streamline activities, sharpen the focus of our programs

and help us work towards making the difference we wish to see in the world.

Considering that impact assessments aim to establish causal relationships between intervention and the outcome of interest, we need to be aware of and record the other influences on the stakeholders of the project.

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Impact Assessments in Education

Anuradha De and Meera Samson

Impact assessments in education have become an increasingly visible strand of educational research. In the past two decades, multiple initiatives have been introduced in government schools in India towards improving access, quality and equity. These initiatives have generally been implemented with resource and technical support received from the private (for profit or non-profit) sector, UN bodies or foreign aid.

Qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews, observation, focus group discussions etc. are ideal to capture many aspects of the education process including quality of teaching and learning. But these are resource and time intensive and do not easily lend themselves to capturing changes over time or across sites.

For example, the Activity Based Learning pedagogy was designed by Rishi Valley school in Andhra Pradesh. It was introduced by Tamil Nadu government in schools in Chennai in 2003 with support from UNICEF.

Other well-known initiatives include Pratham's Read India Campaign introduced in 2007 and Teach for India providing voluntary teachers - introduced in 2009 – both supported by multiple donors.

Impact assessments seek to provide reliable evidence on the impact of such education interventions. This is an important exercise as it not only seeks to estimate the value added by the intervention, but also to provide insights towards what works, and what doesn't work, in a particular context. Assessments are usually undertaken in response to the donors' requirements to see the impact of the initiative they are funding. They are also used to showcase an intervention, to persuade the government to scale up a particular intervention in government schools, or to convince the management of private schools to implement it.

When any new initiative is introduced into the school system, it is expected that it will lead to a series of changes in its functioning including classroom processes, and that these in turn will lead to improved schooling outcomes such as decrease in dropout rates or improved learning levels. These outcomes depend on many factors. To isolate the impact of the initiative, assessments have generally involved comparison of the outcomes in the schools where the intervention has been introduced (intervention schools) with that in schools where there has been no intervention (control schools).

Such assessments are primarily done using a quantitative lens - in the sense that interventions and outcomes are measured by certain indicators and the results interpreted as the change in outcome for a unit change in inputs. For example, studies have estimated the impact of appointing an additional female teacher in school, or the construction of girls' toilets, on the changes in female enrolment and attendance. Other examples include the impact on enrolment, attendance, and

learning levels of introducing midday meals, appointing a volunteer teacher, as well as multi-pronged initiatives spread over a number of years.

Need for Critical Look at Findings of Impact Assessments

The results of such impact assessments are not always conclusive. The estimated impacts can be very different from that expected and interventions tend to show diverse impacts in different contexts. The results may also depend on how long after the implementation the assessment is conducted. So when findings from such studies are presented, they need to be interpreted with care. We discuss below some factors which are important to consider.

The Intervention

Schooling outcomes depend on characteristics of schools, teachers, students and parents. The intervention could be a change in one or more of these — we have mentioned some examples earlier. When examining the results of any assessment, it is important to reflect on the following questions. What is the initiative that has been undertaken? Is there a clear theory of change behind the selection of the initiative, as in what are the factors which are expected to change and why? How will the intervention affect school functioning and classroom processes? How likely are these changes to bring about the expected outcomes? Which factors might act as constraints in reducing the effectiveness of the initiative? Does the theory of change appear to be consistent with the way in which the education system functions?

For example, when a voluntary teacher is appointed to a school, they may well impact classroom processes positively, and so impact students' learning outcomes. But the impact will also depend on the actions of the existing teachers, whether they continue to work as earlier or reduce their teaching

efforts or work harder. The final outcome will depend on the extent to which the intervention accounts for these alternate possibilities. The more important issue of concern may be that such an initiative is not sustainable, and is not dealing with systemic issues of teacher shortage and teacher accountability.

A major problem in a quantitative study is that it is applicable only when impact variables are measurable, or if the impact on them can be seen through some other variables...

Study Design

A second set of concerns deals with the research design and methodology selected for the study. Most impact assessments in education are done using quantitative methods as policy makers and donors feel that numerical data are a powerful source of evidence, and also useful for purposes of comparison between different sites and over time.

As mentioned earlier, this methodology mostly involves the study of one group of schools in which the intervention is introduced (intervention group) and the study in a second group where there is no intervention (control group), collecting data on certain variables before the initiative is introduced (baseline) and after a certain period of time when some impact might be expected to be visible. This could be midway through the project (midline) and at the end of the project (endline).

It is important to know whether the intervention and control groups had similar characteristics at the baseline and were selected randomly (to avoid introducing

any bias in the final results), whether the time frame is long enough for the changes to be visible, and what variables have been selected to capture the impact of the intervention (impact variables).

A major problem in a quantitative study is that it is applicable only when impact variables are measurable, or if the impact on them can be seen through some other variables – for example, if the teachers are provided training to provide inclusive education, changes in their attitudes towards students with disability can be captured through analyzing their responses to a series of questions using a Likert scale.

Qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews, observation, focus group discussions etc. are ideal to capture many aspects of the education process including quality of teaching and learning. But these are resource and time intensive and do not easily lend themselves to capturing changes over time or across sites.

Assessment studies have sometimes used a mixed methods approach – one which combines quantitative and qualitative research methods. The quantitative data provides the evidence on the measurable variables across a wider sample of schools. Qualitative data provides more detailed information on a smaller sample of schools, selected from within the wider set of schools. Through triangulation of findings from these different strands of research, a study can provide a more nuanced understanding of impact, critical in the field of education research.

Implementation Issues

It is often observed that the implementation of the initiative is quite different from the way it was conceived. One of the important reasons is the context in which it is implemented. There are inter-state, inter-district and even inter-block differences related to socio-economic and

geographical characteristics, as well as levels of governance. So even an initiative like construction of a girls' toilet in each school may not show a positive impact, for example, in an area where there is water scarcity.

More important, there are major differences in the functioning of the school system. The same initiative is likely to be implemented differently in areas where schools have a shortage of teachers and poor infrastructure, compared to areas where schools are better resourced.

Even within a specific area, there could be varying degrees of cooperation from the teachers and the Head. When the teachers play an important role in the implementation of an initiative, they are usually required to put in additional time and effort. So the quality of implementation depends on their availability, their motivation, and their ability. When new staff is recruited for program implementation, the cooperation and support given by school staff varies too.

While quantitative studies are useful, they would be of greater value if they were integrated with qualitative research, including insights on the process of change, if any.

The assumption behind an impact assessment is that the initiative is introduced right after the baseline survey, and is implemented with regularity and the same intensity during the intervention period. This is often a challenge as introduction of the initiative requires active support from different persons from within the system. For example, organizations implementing the initiative may get formal permission at the state level to intervene in government schools. But at the district level, they could face additional delays in receiving the go-

ahead. This may impact the timing of when the initiative can be introduced.

For example, an intervention which is to take place at the beginning of the school year may not be undertaken until later in the year when the teachers and students are already stressed by the upcoming annual examinations. The initiative then become much less effective.

The assumption behind an impact assessment is that the initiative is introduced right after the baseline survey, and is implemented with regularity and the same intensity during the intervention period.

Maintaining the regularity and intensity of the initiative is also difficult as it depends on the resources and motivation of the implementors. And the transfer of officials in the government which is a regular feature also slows down the implementation.

All these factors are critically important when looking at the findings presented. These challenges are typically not included in an impact assessment study. During dissemination most studies are focused only on the impact and the final outcomes.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Education interventions are quite complex. They require active involvement of many individuals. If successfully implemented, they may be able to have a positive impact in the education system in some contexts. However, they are difficult to replicate.

Their impact depends on conditions within the school and external to the school, all of which vary greatly in different contexts and are changing over time. The more serious issue is how sustainable they are,

and to what extent they can strengthen the education system in the long run.

A nuanced and holistic approach is required to assess the impact of these initiatives. Often a quantitative approach is assumed to be most suitable, particularly given the value placed on findings from a large and randomly selected sample. Going wide is more appreciated than going deep.

While quantitative studies are useful, they would be of greater value if they were integrated with qualitative research, including insights on the process of change, if any. While impact assessments have the potential to provide useful evidence for policy makers, it is important to be aware of their limitations.

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Program Evaluation in India

The Perspective of Evaluators and Practitioners

Binoy Cherian and Vishwas V Patel

The domain of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities has evolved over the years and secured a firm standing in the development sector in India today. With the aid of technological tools, and the imperative of accountability on programs – both internally to organizations themselves, and externally to funders – M&E has become an inalienable part of every program. “Coming up with a strong M&E [framework] with a justifiable resource allocation can also make a proposal very strong,” says a practitioner with over 18 years of experience in the development sector, hinting at the importance of having an M&E system in place even before program rollout.

While IE may not be required for each and every program, from a policy-making perspective – to see whether programs are scalable, not just for organizations themselves but for policymakers in general – rigorous evaluation evidence becomes imperative.

Here, it is pertinent to note a distinction between regular project monitoring and overall program impact evaluation – M&E cannot always be viewed as a monolithic domain. While monitoring of every program has become indispensable for accurate record keeping, tracking KPIs (Key

Performance Indicators) and reporting to donors, impact assessment is more discretionary. Depending on the nature, scale, time-frame of the project, available budget, and whether there is any real need for evaluation evidence – for instance, for upscaling or replicating the project – impact evaluation (IE) is undertaken.

While large implementing organizations have well-capacitated independent M&E teams, smaller organizations confine themselves to monitoring through standard approaches such as logframe and theory of change (ToC). Where program evaluation is required, it is outsourced to external agencies. It is not only that evaluation requires a more sophisticated, systematic approach with corresponding skills and capacities, but also that an external professional agency imparts more credibility. While IE may not be required for each and every program, from a policy-making perspective – to see whether programs are scalable, not just for organizations themselves but for policymakers in general – rigorous evaluation evidence becomes imperative.

This article, based on about-an-hour-long, semi-structured interviews with twelve practitioners from nine leading implementing/evaluation organizations, presents some of the current practices as well as challenges with regard to M&E systems/practices in India.

Current M&E Practices: Some Salient Aspects

As with other sectors, technological advancement has had a major bearing on

M&E practices. Some of the common data collection tools include KOBO, SurveyCTO, ODK Collect, etc. Frequently used data analysis tools include Excel, SPSS, STATA, R, NVivo and Atlas.ti. And popular geographic mapping tools include Google Earth Pro and QGIS.

A more sophisticated aid, Airtable, is used to map the questionnaire to the outcomes outlined in ToC. The length of the questionnaire tends to be inversely proportional to the quality of data collected. “Applications like Airtable help with keeping the questionnaire short while corresponding with all the outcomes,” opines a researcher at a top evaluation organization.

Viewing through the methodological lens, there is a growing appreciation of the importance of context in program evaluation.

Proper data collection is a crucial task over which rest of the M&E work rests. It should be done in a timely manner and with integrity. Some of the organizations have developed a large cadre of community data collectors (CDCs), equipped with smartphones and digital data collection applications. Otherwise, data collection could get tedious and hamper other program-related work of development practitioners.

Delegating data collection – with suitable compensation – to trained data collectors is a welcome practice. This indirectly strengthens outreach and engagement with the community too. The upskilled CDCs can also find work with other organizations in need of data collection. Training workshops for CDCs keep them up to date with best practices and technological upgrades regarding data collection.

Here, as a good practice, care is exercised to contextualize the questionnaire, so that

survey respondents easily relate with the questions. For example, in the words of a senior practitioner, “*bigha* is a unit of measurement of land used in various parts of the country. There should be an option to collect data in *bigha*, and later during analysis it may be converted into acre or other standard units.”

Viewing through the methodological lens, there is a growing appreciation of the importance of context in program evaluation. Though RCT (Randomized Controlled Trial) is considered the gold standard in research methodology, there is an increasing trend of adopting the mixed methods approach to obtain more contextual insights. Here, in addition to impact evaluation, process evaluation takes due emphasis by relying on suitable qualitative methods so as to address not only the ‘what’ question but also the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions of program impact.

Having a separate vertical in charge of quality assurance mechanisms is another good practice. Some organizations use audio audits as a mechanism for back checks in survey data collection as part of quality assurance. SurveyCTO, for instance, provides an option for audio recording for different durations.

By randomizing such recordings across data fields, any attempt at gaming the survey process could be effectively tackled. Using these audio audits for back checks – as opposed to doing it physically by revisiting a sample of households – is a major innovation in M&E field practice.

Informed consent forms with research participants are a necessary requirement and some of the organizations are comparatively more stringent about it. There are efforts to uphold data privacy and integrity, under the larger ambit of research ethics. Data privacy agreements between organizations, stipulating protocols for management and protection of data, are followed in some organizations. For instance, at no cost, personally identifiable information could be

leaked. Data sharing in these organizations happens legitimately and through encrypted files only. In the odd chance of data breach, remedial protocols are laid out.

Some organizations are expanding the scope of M&E by linking these with research and advocacy work. They produce status reports pertaining to their domain of work. For instance, the status of agrarian economy, adivasi livelihood, etc. is published and disseminated. There may already exist reports that provide a broad picture of the state of different domains; incorporating insights from M&E complements this knowledge repository.

“There is a subtle distinction, with the emphasis M&E brings on data and metrics,” points out a senior practitioner. “For example, details such as mean income of adivasis in Jharkhand; percentage of adivasi people lacking food security; data on their dietary diversity, etc. add richness to reports.”

In addition, some organizations tie up with university researchers to conduct evaluation research. Such studies often aim for methodological innovations to uncover program insights, ultimately contributing to evaluation literature.

Challenges and Way Ahead

While the M&E space is witness to many good practices, there remain several challenges too. One of them is the power dynamics between funding organizations and implementing organizations. There is a need for more dialogue and deliberation between donors and development practitioners, and for better cross-sectoral knowledge sharing. The corporate sector, from which donors predominantly hail, is incongruous with the development sector in several respects.

For instance, owing to the social and politico-economic realities on the ground, the latter operates amidst peculiar problems and constraints. An appreciation of this is often

missing among donor agencies who typically, as perceived by development practitioners, do not have sufficient exposure to these ground-level realities.

Some organizations are expanding the scope of M&E by linking these with research and advocacy work. They produce status reports pertaining to their domain of work.

Also, there is much difference between the corporate sector and development sector in terms of strategy, timelines, stakeholder engagement, and ways of functioning in general. So, in designing project proposals, and determining project outcomes and indicators, there is a need for consensus building with inputs and expertise drawn from across sectors.

In a similar vein, there is a need for better appreciation among donors about the importance of qualitative methodologies, in addition to quantitative ones in evaluations. Given high cost, owing to longer timelines and the requirement of high-skilled professionals, qualitative studies are usually disregarded, despite the rich contextual and process-related insights they could offer on projects. The advent of the mixed methods approach, with the inherent triangulation benefits, is encouraging; yet this methodological open-mindedness should be genuine and not merely employed for cosmetic reasons.

In this regard, a recent innovation within qualitative methodology is worth highlighting. Audio diaries – audio recording devices, typically the ubiquitous mobile phone – are used to collect (mostly semi-literate) “participants’ practices, feelings, reflections, and interactions with their physical and social environment in real time.”

Talking about methodologies, while RCT is considered the gold standard of evaluation, it may not always be feasible. An essential feature of RCT is the random choice of intervention and control groups from the same eligible population – but often in reality it is hard to satisfy this strict requirement. There could be conflicting interests of implementers and evaluators. While the latter may ask for delaying certain interventions for control groups, the former might have to deliver their interventions in a time-bound manner.

In such scenarios, deft negotiation is called for. And, in lieu of RCT, a suitable difference-in-differences (DD; either double difference or triple difference) estimator could be employed. With DD, intervention and control groups are chosen from naturally occurring settings (quasi-experimental) – as opposed to RCT which requires their homogenization (strict experimental setting) – and differences in outcomes over time between those groups are compared for analysis.

Regarding the operational and procedural challenges of M&E, some senior executives candidly revealed that there is a sense of dissatisfaction, if not suspicion, about M&E among practitioners. Often the response is that nothing new or striking is revealed by M&E – with the refrain being “This was always known.” On the contrary, there are doubts expressed about the validity of M&E results, with the objection that insights and experience gathered from regular fieldwork run counter to the results of M&E. Some practitioners feel that M&E is used for surveillance of field staff, which should not be the case.

This fragile state of affairs can only be effectively addressed by designing and executing participative, comprehensive and professional evaluation studies. Further, “There should be a concerted effort to elevate M&E into MEL: A Learning framework should complement M&E activities,” as suggested

by a senior practitioner. This would facilitate drawing lessons from the work of various programs and projects for the professional growth of practitioners, as well as for the growth of the organization as a whole. This would help curb the resentment against M&E that it is ‘limited,’ ‘extractive’ and ‘ritualistic,’ catering only to the requirements of external donors. It would encourage more willing participation in M&E from the staff as well.

There is also much talk around participatory M&E. Generally, community participation, and inclusivity therein, is limited to the stage of data collection alone. To enhance the participatory value of M&E, ensuring meaningful community participation in the design of evaluation studies is advisable. Also, efforts are needed to take the findings and evidence of evaluations back to the community, for their intimation and deliberation. It should be presented in their language and in a way that is simple and easy to understand. This would help improve community investment and participation in enhancing the success of developmental programs. In the words of another senior practitioner, good M&E should see “community as partners rather than as beneficiaries.”

So, in designing project proposals, and determining project outcomes and indicators, there is a need for consensus building with inputs and expertise drawn from across sectors.

The observance of transparency, reproducibility and ethics (TRE) in M&E practice must become more commonplace. It has to go beyond the standard practices of ethical research such as obtaining informed consent from research participants,

respecting their rights, maintaining confidentiality, etc.

There must be more emphasis on ensuring transparency and reproducibility of data throughout the program cycle so that other, independent researchers could verify the evaluation findings and results through their own analyses, enhancing the credibility of evaluation studies.



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Often there is a bias toward positive outcomes. But there remain valuable lessons to be learnt from failed programs. By taking the effort to publish zero-result and negative-result studies as well, key insights and evidence could be tapped that would be helpful for future programs and interventions.

Conclusion

Over the last few decades, M&E has gained in momentum within the development sector in India. One sees a terminological advance with MEL, MERL (including Research and Learning), MEAL (including Accountability and Learning) – signifying the broadening scope and ambit of M&E activities. In consort, there are several best practices witnessed in this space, encompassing technological aids, procedural and methodological innovations, and growing importance of data and research ethics. In tandem, however, are the challenges that need to be tackled. Navigating intersectoral

competing interests, under-appreciation of qualitative approaches, and poor community engagement are some areas in need of further work. With a growing movement of M&E practice, research and advocacy, the road ahead promises durable solutions and more good practices.

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Impact Assessment of Livelihood Interventions

Annapurna Neti and Puja Guha

Many livelihood approaches in the last three decades had their bases in the definition given by Chambers & Conway (1992), the DFID Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (DFID, 1999), and other similar frameworks.

'A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base'.

(Chambers & Conway 1992)

Given this framing, livelihood programs comprise a variety of interventions aimed at protecting, enhancing and promoting livelihood strategies of people and improving their livelihood security and well-being in the long-term. These include supporting on-farm and off-farm income generating activities, skill development, enhancing capabilities to access and engage in alternative means of livelihood, capability building and financial support for self-employment activities, market support and so on. Livelihood security of a household can be improved by providing access to productive resources (includes replacing and rebuilding them when required), diversifying income generating activities, creating and protecting household assets and reserves, and a combination of any of these strategies.

In particular, during unforeseen events such as natural disasters or economic shocks, it is important to prevent erosion of productive assets and build households' ability to cope and maintain their livelihoods. Such efforts are paramount to ensure the livelihood security of households and to help them minimize their vulnerability to external shocks (Chambers 1989).

The key objectives and expected outcomes of livelihood interventions may include improved food security of the household, enhanced productivity, increased days of employment, increased income and creation of assets, enhanced economic self-resilience and reduced vulnerability, poverty reduction, and overall well-being of the household. Apart from some of these outcomes, many interventions also result in an intended or unintended impact on areas such as education and health. Such unintended consequences (either positive or negative), are further amplified by the interdependence of livelihood activities (for example, agriculture and cattle rearing) and diversification of households' livelihood activities.

Furthermore, there are multiple external socio-economic and political influences on the livelihoods of people, their claims to resources, and community and institutional support systems that moderate the potential impact. Given the vast scope of interventions and the possible range of outcomes, practitioners often have to make conscious choices and trade-offs about the objectives, type of interventions, implementation models, intended beneficiaries, sectors, and so on.

The Theory of Change and Program Theory

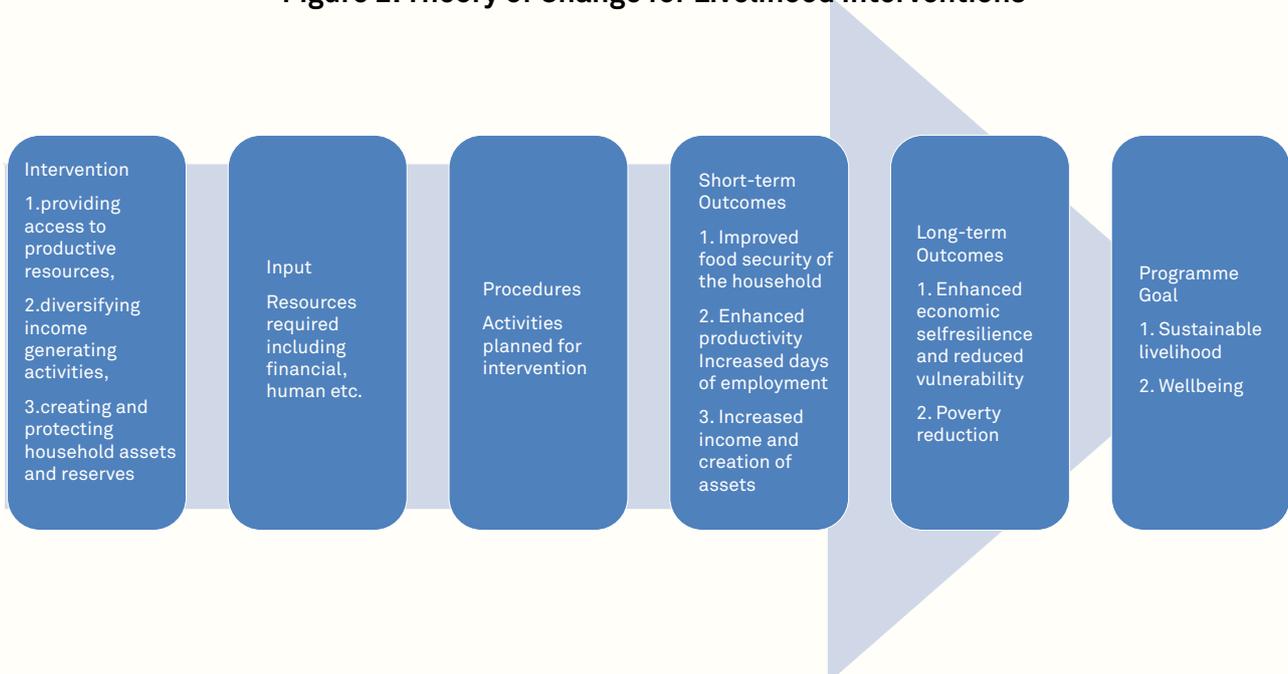
The theory of change (TOC) is the foundational element of any evaluation. TOC maps the outcomes to the intervention through the processes of the program (Figure 1). The TOC for livelihood interventions broadly explains how specific interventions lead to immediate and long-term outcomes (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Theory of Change



In case of livelihood interventions, the theory of change can broadly be illustrated as follows:

Figure 2: Theory of Change for Livelihood Interventions



For a robust theory of change, it is important to establish a strong causality between interventions and outcomes, and making sure that the outcomes are realized only because of the interventions and nothing else - this indicates internal validity. Similarly, it also needs to take into account any unintended outcome that the program might have resulted in, and accommodate for the same in the program evaluation process.

The role of theorizing the program - both its processes and impacts - is an important step before assessing the impacts. Program theory helps in establishing the causal link between the interventions and the outcomes, which can be either intended or unintended. Let's take the example of MNREGA, where the intended outcome is to create employment opportunities for men and women in rural areas.

With both the adult members employed, the responsibilities for household chores may fall on children, particularly girls, which may cause their dropping out of school. Hence, one of the unintended outcomes of MNREGA could be increased drop-out rates of girl children. Thus, it is important to theorize the impact of MNREGA in the context of the labor market, where child labor could be an unintended consequence.

Livelihood Impact Assessment Approaches

Conventionally impact assessment for any program is done to assess whether the program is able to meet the desired, pre-decided outcomes. The findings of such an evaluation is largely used for making a decision about continuation of the program. Thus, such evaluations are objective in nature and often deal with tangible economic measures. However, livelihood impact assessment should deal not only with assessing the outcome, but also improving practices (Van Rijn et.al., 2012). In other words, the impact assessment of livelihood projects should not stop just at evaluating economic gains of the households. Rather, it should also assess the changes that the interventions have brought about in the lives of people.

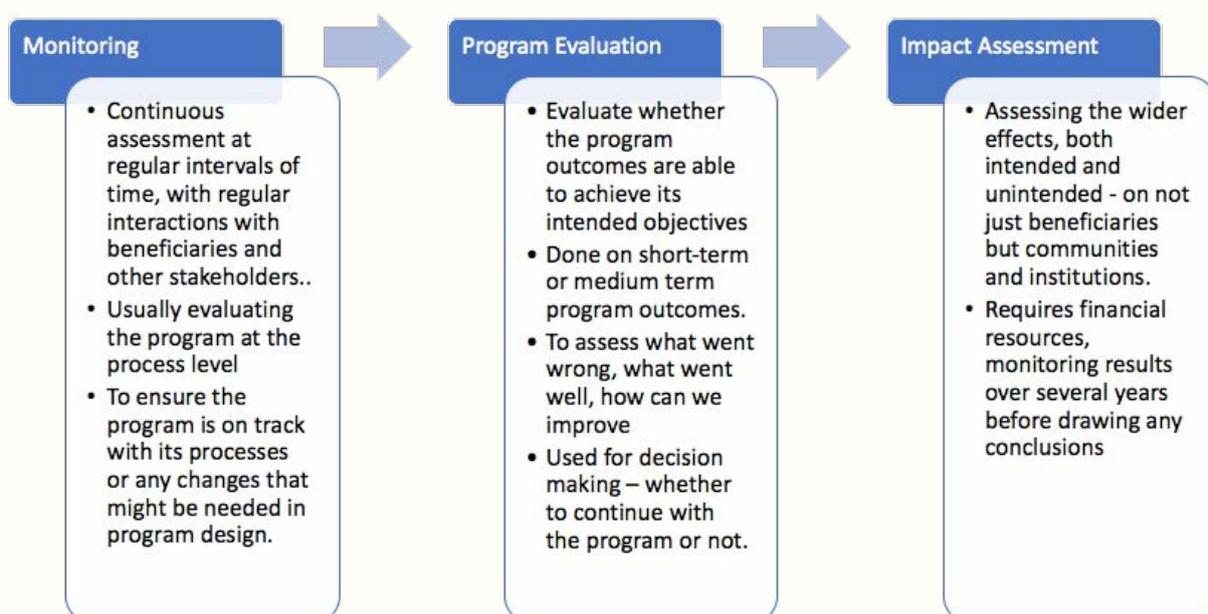
There have been many approaches to evaluate the impact of livelihood interventions. The conventional approaches often adopt quantitative methods to look at pre and post intervention data on the outcomes, and assess the effectiveness of the program based on the differences between the two. Given the objective nature of this approach, it often misses out on the

‘other factors’ that might be instrumental in bringing about changes.

Another prominently used approach is participatory impact assessment, which is often an alternative to the conventional quantitative method. One of the key aspects of the livelihoods framework is the emphasis on the centrality of the people themselves and their perspectives, needs, priorities and strategies (DFID 1999, Scoones 2009). This framework helps not only in identifying indicators for assessing output of the interventions, but also in identifying desirable outcomes as defined by the people themselves. In a participatory impact assessment approach, the progress and the outcome parameter on which the program will be evaluated, is decided by the stakeholders of the project, i.e., beneficiaries, authorities, facilitators etc. It is a collective effort and hence is susceptible to power dynamism.

Yet another approach of doing livelihood impact assessment is to use the sustainable livelihoods framework to evaluate the effect of programs on the work and lives of people. This tries to address the limitations of the above two approaches, by bringing in both quantitative and qualitative data.

Figure 3: Purpose of Monitoring, Program Evaluation and Impact Assessment



Monitoring, Evaluation and Impact Assessment and Their Purpose

Assessment of a livelihood program can be done at multiple levels. It can take place at the implementation stage. It may be undertaken at the stage when initial level of outcomes are being realized, usually in the short-term. It may also be done after a long-term running of the program, to assess its wider impact.

Illustration

The Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) was launched in 2011 with the objective of reducing rural poverty by creating institutional platforms of rural poor and enabling access to self-employment and wage employment opportunities (<https://aajeevika.gov.in/en/content/mission>).

This translates into three broad categories of interventions - collectivizing rural poor into self-help groups (SHGs) and SHG federations, building their capacity through training, and providing access to financial services (Barooah et al 2019).

A simplified TOC (Figure 4 in this page) describes how these interventions result in intermediate and long-term outcomes. Building grassroots institutions of the poor and providing financial literacy and business training results in multiple intermediate outcomes. These include access to financial services for the underbanked and investments in income generating activities.

Some of the long-term dividends are envisaged to be increased household incomes and assets and improved participation of women in household decision making. Of course, there are many assumptions underlying this theory of change - that the groups are functional, training is relevant, timely and adequate, groups are connected to external sources of finance (Barooah et al 2019), there are investment as well as marketing opportunities, and so on.

Livelihood programs such as the DAY-NRLM impact multiple dimensions directly and indirectly related to livelihood promotion/protection as well as social and political dimensions in the long-term. Thus evaluation and impact assessment for such programs can be complex and resource intensive.

Figure 4: Simplified TOC for DAY-NRLM

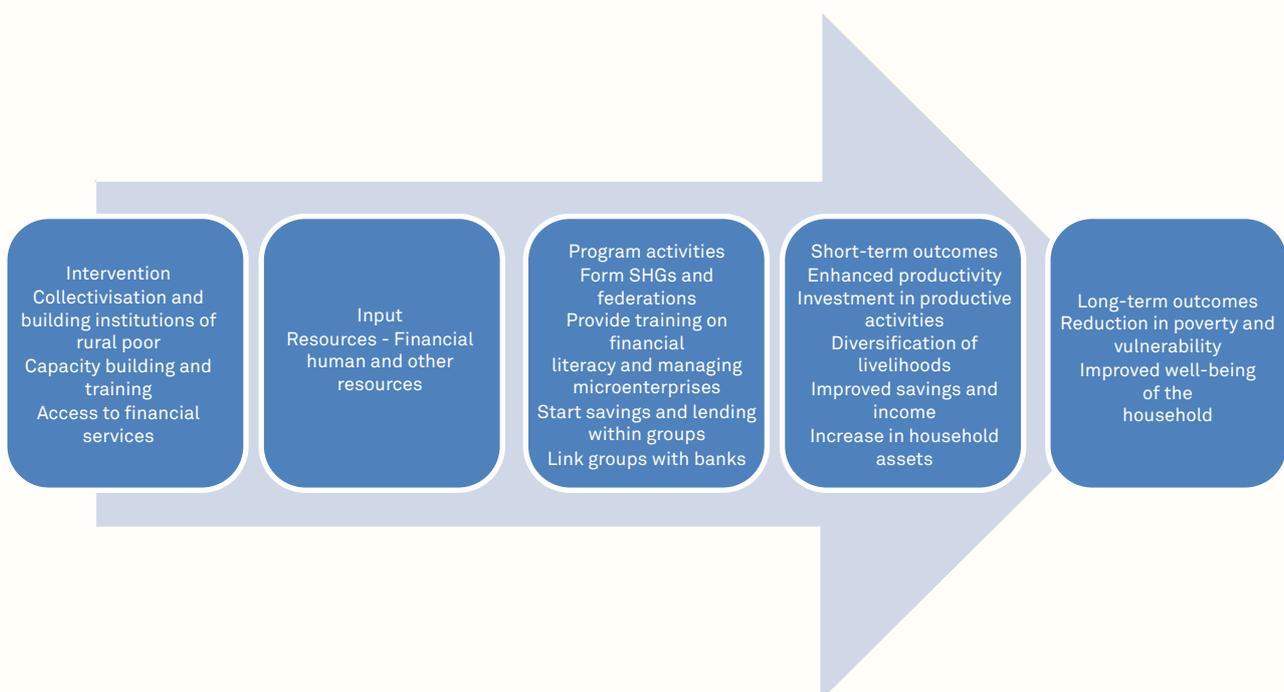
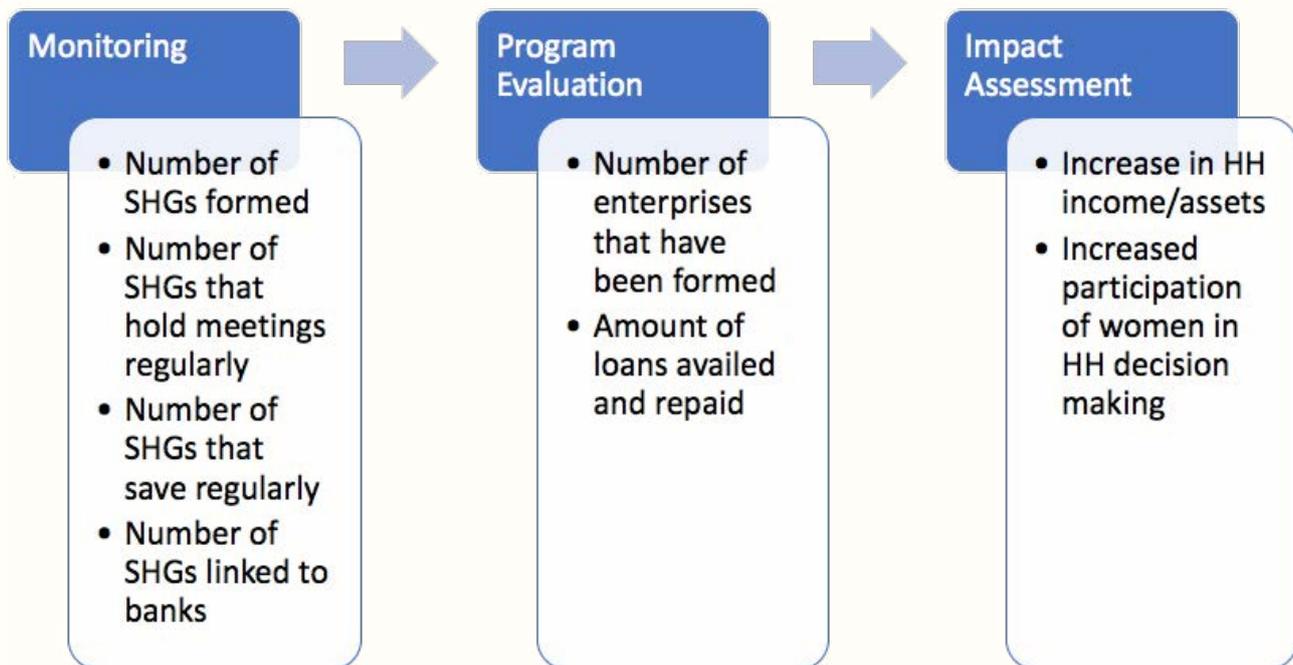


Figure 5: Monitoring, Program Evaluation and Impact Assessment Indicators for DAY-NRLM



Some impact assessments may take several years to conduct, extending well-beyond the intervention period. However, a well-defined theory of change, monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment are crucial to ensure that interventions actually lead to outcomes and to inform program and policy decisions by providing evidence for programs that are beneficial.

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Impact Assessment Processes as Advocacy

The Role of Funders

Samuhik Pahal Team

Jacob John leads the Effects and Learning team at Azim Premji Foundation. He has worked for more than 20 years in the development sector working in field implementation, policy and advocacy as well as funder roles.

Samuhik Pahal: According to you, what are the effective ways to conceptualize impact in the social sector, especially in the field of education?

Jacob John: Education is an integrated system. Therefore, impact in education is directly linked to the achievement of composite, interdependent outcomes. Here we conceptualize an outcome a little differently than other sectors. Outcomes in education, especially in India, are culminating demonstrations of learning, involvement and ownership for a diverse set of stakeholders. For students these involve learning outcomes assessing literacy and numeracy and problem-solving skills. For teachers these entail outcomes measuring proficiency in participative techniques, new teaching tools and subject competence. For school administrators outcomes involve assessing fee structures, inclusivity, fair and student friendly assessments, facilities for students and teachers. With respect to communities, outcomes entail measuring community ownership of the school system (especially important in rural areas) and involvement in School Management Committees. In terms of the government, outcomes are about measuring literacy rate, gross enrolment rate, mean years of schooling, dropout rates, etc.

Samuhik Pahal: What may be the more productive ways of assessing impact in the social sector?

Jacob John: The social sector measures impact reasonably well, both quantitatively and qualitatively. It is important to triangulate data from multiple sources so that there is comparability across different locations and contexts. Standardization of indicators and building comparability and conversations are also important. For example, using ASER as a take-off point for conversations on impact would add richness to the debate. Doing this would help the sector to do advocacy better, based on impact assessment. We can become more productive by turning impact assessment into data-backed advocacy through collective action.

Samuhik Pahal: What role do qualitative tools have to play in impact assessment?

Jacob John: Qualitative tools go beyond the numerical dimensions of key issues to the heart of the education system, based on the experiences of key stakeholders. For example, a qualitative interview with a student who is a first-generation learner can show just where classroom teaching and assessments are failing to meet her needs. Once we are able to identify and address these issues, the impact of teaching and assessment will increase, both in terms of learning outcomes and in terms of retention of first-generation learners in schools.

Similarly, a focused group discussion with teachers during or after a teacher training



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program can help to highlight the key techniques or subjects they need help with. This can help to design better trainings, delivering better impacts for teaching and learning in the future.

Samuhik Pahal: According to you, what values are prioritized in the dominant thinking surrounding impact assessment of social sector programs? Are there some other values that we need to factor in as well? If yes, then how do we do this in practical terms?

Jacob John: As of now, the dominant thinking in impact assessment is just quantitative. For example, in education we look at enrolment rates, mean years in schooling, and dropout rates. We do not factor in qualitative data on the differential educational experience of first-generation learners and those coming from literate families. This leads to an incomplete impact assessment of the cumulative nature of educational outcomes.

Similarly, in healthcare we focus on per capita availability of doctors and health infrastructure at the community level.

However, we do not measure for the cumulative educational, financial, and geographical deprivations that lead for unequal healthcare access for some vulnerable groups.

In simple words, we measure impacts as if these are equally distributed across communities and families. This is clearly not the case. We need to integrate qualitative data into every quantitative measurement to figure out the full story. We can do this by using qualitative tools and cohort tracking in impact assessment.

Samuhik Pahal: What role do you think funders and funding agencies can play both in setting an enabling narrative and in bringing in marginal yet important values?

Jacob John: Funders have an important role to play in turning impact assessment data into a credible and effective advocacy loop for improvement of service delivery by the government. This is true particularly in Asia and Africa where existing feedback loops do not automatically have stakeholder review or free flow of information built in.

“Uniformity of Design, Comparability and Economies of Scale”

Felt Need for Standardized Templates in Impact Assessment

Samuhik Pahal Team

Bikkrama Daulet Singh is a Managing Director at Central Square Foundation (CSF) and he co-leads CSF’s strategy, operations and external partnerships as well. He also provides leadership to CSF’s work across the domains of Policy Advocacy and Communications, Ed-tech, Private school sector, Public governance, Research and M&E, and Early Childhood Education.

Samuhik Pahal: Initially it might help our readers if you could please share how CSF is addressing the issue of improving learning outcomes through its programs, especially in the context of the learning crisis in India that has now been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bikkrama Daulet Singh: Central Square Foundation has been working on improving quality of learning for ten years now. We have iterated a lot on our approach, based on learnings, feedbacks and mistakes. Nearly four years ago we sharpened our work towards improving foundational learning. For the first 5-6 years, we were making many grants; we were doing a lot of ecosystem building and communications work; we were working with governments. We were doing all this around thematic areas. We had taken up assessment reforms, school leadership, early childhood education, and many other pillars.

Looking at systemic data, we saw that learning levels were falling. One interesting metric we looked at is that of ‘Learning

Poverty’, which the World Bank came up with, in 2019, based on government data for many countries. They estimated learning poverty in India at 55%. Out of hundred children in India 55 at the age of 10 could not read a basic text with comprehension, and this is even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The learning crisis in India is stark. How does it matter? Looking at longitudinal data, talking to experts in pedagogy and teachers, it is very clear that if children do not acquire critical, foundational learning skills early enough, their learning trajectory just flattens.

We went back to the drawing board and asked ourselves about the nature of this learning crisis. When we started to look at much of the data, a clear insight was that the learning crisis starts early. Therefore, we sharpened all our work by saying, “We will focus everything on foundational learning skills.”

How we have done that is by doing 3-4 things. One, we think we need to build more awareness around the issue of foundational learning. We need to show this as an opportunity for policy makers. We want to focus on learning outcomes and not in a vague way; so, that involves choosing a metric, say ‘Learning Poverty,’ and making it a key priority.

Subsequent to this, the central government launched a national mission, Nipun Bharat, for achieving foundational literacy and numeracy. If there is no model for showing

that things can improve, then it is just another program, just another scheme. Therefore, we are working now across twelve states where we have set up PMUs.

As a consortium, we sign an MoU with the state government to implement Nipun Bharat in a robust way. We bring in a project management partner. We then bring in pedagogical organizations who know the science of language or math learning, who have demonstrated programs at reasonable scale. They join as technical support organizations. We bring the consortium together, provide coordination, and undertake stakeholder management with the government. Over the next 3-4 years we hope to show some improvements.

Looking at longitudinal data, talking to experts in pedagogy and teachers, it is very clear that if children do not acquire critical, foundational learning skills early enough, their learning trajectory just flattens.

The other thing we are looking at is Ed-Tech that can provide evidence-based solutions to improve children's foundational learning. ASER has been tracking digital adoption in rural India. Data shows that two-thirds of parents have a dedicated smart phone for learning. COVID has been a huge fillip.

We have seeded certain Ed-Techs. We have also provided funding support to a few Ed-Techs and are working with them in a system oriented way. These organizations do not target 'India-1', but Bharat, i.e., India-2 and India-3, which for example, use low-tech, WhatsApp-based models.

Samuhik Pahal: How do you see the evolution of CSF's impact assessment strategy over the last decade?

Bikkrama Daulet Singh: I will look at it as impact assessment of CSF's work. Impact assessment is such an important aspect of the work of the nonprofit ecosystem. There has not been enough awareness and investment around impact assessment in this space. If you look at today's CSR spend, there are estimates that there is nine to ten thousand crores of CSR spend and forty percent of that goes into education.

However, if you look at the evidence base of school education reforms in India, the only rigorous evidence that we have is the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) Program from PRATHAM that was evaluated by J-PAL (Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab). Of course, there are a few others. There is US-AID, a multilateral funder, that funded a series of organizations including Room to Read, CARE and others, where they also tracked some evaluations. However, if you see the evidence base available today, it is not very robust.

What many funders require is just some pre and post, some kind of a report. The impact assessment landscape is very sparse. When you look at CSF's own journey, for the initial 4-5 years, we were not running programs, but were supporting partners. We used to do a lot of grant making to early stage non-profits. What we found was that the questions around impact assessment were very much a zero-sum game. You are doing no impact assessment. Alternatively, you are doing a very rigorous RCT. People would have aspirations of doing these. Actually, they are not doing anything.

When we look at our own work, over time we also built capacity in M&E, brought in experts and built the function within CSF. The way we evolved was that we started locating monitoring and impact assessment as a continuum, as a journey.

More important than even getting third party impact assessment and evaluation is to start

looking at the data of your own programs, of your partners' programs, with a very close lens.

One needs to systematically think what the theory of change of this program is, what are some of the key indicators that you should be tracking, what is the review mechanism of tracking, how do we track that data, and start to look at it. Moreover, you have to use that data to have conversations with your own program teams, with your partners, and use it to fine-tune the intervention model.

Many funders do not want to fund evaluations. They want to fund programs.

When you feel that the theory of change, the intervention, seems to be working well, then one can go on and do an impact assessment. Many organizations in the ecosystem do not do the monitoring part of the process very systematically, and then jump to do impact assessment.

Because everyone ultimately wants a pat in the back, that yes, this is working or not working. I think it is not being fair to your partners and your own programs if you are not using data to iterate and build that sort of muscle. That is the first point I am making.

The other point is that, when you come to impact assessment, there are many challenges in India. There is a dearth of organizations that can work with you to undertake the assessment. There are many data collection organizations. Then there are some organizations that do evaluations.

However, in my opinion, they are over-priced. Many of them focus on multilateral programs. For Indian foundations, for non-profits, there are very few partners to go to who can put a strong research lens on their work and design an evaluation with a reasonable level of rigor. Not every organization can go to a J-PAL and do an RCT (Randomized Controlled Trial).

I really feel that there is a gap in the ecosystem.

There are many evaluations happening, especially of the CSR programs. These are often of a very low quality and have poor research design. Then we have a few RCTs done by known researchers. What we need then is to lower the barriers for organizations to access and undertake impact assessment.

We have been increasingly trying to enable comparisons between our different impact assessments. Because we started doing so many things around foundational learning, we said, "Look. Why do we not invest in a common assessment tool? Ideally, such a tool should lend itself for use even if the sites differ. Even if one of them has an offline program model, whereas another is more of an Ed-Tech model, let us try to assess all of these through a common assessment tool."

We customized a version of EGRA-EGMA (Early Grade Math Assessment-Early Grade Reading Assessment). This is an assessment tool available as public goods and used across a large number of countries. So we adapted it and linked it to the NCERT curriculum and our context. We used that across our portfolio.

However, we still struggle with many issues. Let us take one example. We have Ed-Tech partners. All of them have their journeys around evidence building. For each of these we have found different research partners. Each of these researchers will have a different research design.

If we could create a research lab... We have been conceptualizing this. Many of these products could go through that funnel. In addition, there would be a research advisory group. It would lower barriers and costs for undertaking evaluations.

Because in many cases if the evaluation cost is such a significant investment, many organizations struggle to raise money. Many

fundes do not want to fund evaluations. They want to fund programs. The second goal is to ensure uniformity of design, comparability and economies of scale. These are a few of the things we have been thinking across.

Samuhik Pahal: What are the values do you think we need to focus on with respect to impact assessment?

Bikkrama Daulet Singh: A lot of the impact assessment space is very compliance driven. Many programs need impact assessment for a donor, or for a CSR partner. Therefore, they just go in and do that. They design a custom evaluation for that partner and undertake it. The challenge is that, it is not comparable. It is not relevant from a systems perspective.

When I talk about monitoring, I am speaking of systemically monitoring. In program monitoring, one has to identify key metric, look at that data, analyze it, reflect on it. This has to become an important priority...

We have been working on foundational learning in India. We have looked at the entire evidence base in this field. I can count on my fingers the number of actual reports of quality and rigor that are available that you can show to a policy maker and make a case, that this problem can be solved. If everyone started to invest in evidence of a certain caliber, then we will build the field. Here some norms need to be established.

We may have to work on some kind of an ecosystem platform where we can invest in public goods like common assessment tools, some sample designs that people can take off the shelves. Otherwise, there is so much custom work. It is not very rigorous and it is

not very useful. Those are the kind of things we need to push for.

Samuhik Pahal: How can impact assessment contribute to learning processes of organizations across the ecosystem?



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Bikkrama Daulet Singh: This is a cultural thing. How does one look at data and use it as a tool for improvement and feedback? When you work with governments and different organizations, you realize that there is not this culture of drawing insights from the program data that you already have. Forget even collecting new data.

Here I think the point I made earlier on really looking at monitoring as a key focus... You will often see that one does not get any feedback loop from programs, till the final end of the program or some impact assessment report.

When I talk about monitoring, I am speaking of systemically monitoring. In program monitoring, one has to identify key metric, look at that data, analyze it, reflect on it.

This has to become an important priority, if you want impact assessments or evaluations to feed back into programs. Moreover, we must create some public datasets. One can look at housing these in research arms of universities. Otherwise, there is so much duplication of work.

What the Numbers Miss

Samuhik Pahal Team

P. S. Narayan is Vice President and Head of Sustainability at Wipro Ltd. In this role, he has been instrumental in the creation and stewarding of Wipro's sustainability initiative since its inception in early 2008.

Samuhik Pahal: According to you what are the effective ways to conceptualize impact in the social sector, especially in the field of education?

P. S. Narayan: At Wipro, we have been a little ambivalent about impact assessment. In particular, that ambivalence stems from the education domain where it has been difficult for us to wrap our heads around whether there is a clear, consistent way of measuring impact. To our minds, the answer to that has been broadly, "No." We have arrived at this conclusion based on our own experience of two decades as well as what we have drawn and inferred from the work of Azim Premji Foundation in school education. Essentially our position is that, typically the way impact assessment frameworks work, which is trying to quantify many things, it ends up becoming a little bit of a force-fit, and can lead to contrived conclusions.

For certain good reasons, that all of us are well aware of, the impact of education cascades through long periods of time, both in an individual's life trajectory as well as at a collective, societal level. In fact, this period can stretch even for decades. Whereas contrast this with the short time windows which typical impact assessment frameworks work within and try to encompass their findings and analyses.

Of course, one could carve it out into different categories. For example, if it is just literacy and numeracy statistics, and all you are trying to say is in a geography of

interest - a village, a district, a ward in a city - whether these numbers have improved. You see whether enrolments have gone up in the target segments, typically vulnerable communities, or if the children have reached certain grade-specific competencies, and then you reach the conclusion that literacy levels have increased, and numeracy has increased.

The impact of education cascades through long periods of time. Moreover, depending on what you are trying to do in terms of the objectives, the time period can even be of decades.

But if you want to qualify your outcomes and impact in a more comprehensive way in terms of children coming out of school having certain attributes like the ability to do critical thinking, the ability to look at things in a connected way, a certain rounded cognitive and emotional confidence that will stand them in good stead after school in their future life-trajectories, reflecting a school culture that is free from fear and is inclusive in the most fundamental ways, all these are critical factors for creating an environment of true learning for children from vulnerable communities who form a very important and sizeable segment we work with.

If you put all of these things together, then one can see very clearly that you need longitudinal studies spanning several years. You need disciplined ways of doing 'before -after analysis' over long periods of time. At least in the impact assessment ecosystem that we currently have in the country, these

are absent entirely or partially. One reason is that many of the players in this space have just come in recently. They would not have done the baseline assessment for the children, who are coming out of school today, i.e., they would have had to do it ten years back. Second, if they were doing a baseline today, then they would have to wait for ten years, twelve years, or even longer. It has to be longitudinal.

Therefore, impact assessment studies in domains such as education need to be interpreted very carefully and selectively. In that context, I would think that the 'input-output-outcome-impact' framework is useful in offering a more honest framing of how you see and analyse things. In most cases what you are seeing are just inputs and outputs. In some cases, you may be able to report outcomes, but very rarely impacts.

Therefore, if an organization like us has to report on the work we have been doing, we have no problem in doing it. However, we have to qualify it against a framework and say, what we have achieved is a certain set of outputs; these can be the number of children reached out to or number of teachers being engaged with. However, importantly, we must also qualify it by saying that the nature of social change - be it in ecology, or education or primary healthcare - is so large and complex, that anything that we do will be marginal, in terms of its overall impact. Therefore, we have to qualify it appropriately against this larger picture.

I will give you one more example - Wipro as a business (not related to CSR) is committed to something called net zero greenhouse gas emissions. Which essentially means that we reduce our own carbon footprint associated with our buildings, facilities, traveling, commuting etc. Our footprint is big. In fact, it is huge. Therefore, we will reduce it gradually, and we will be net zero by 2040. Moreover, we will do it without taking recourse to what are called 'offsets'. Which means, if you fund

afforestation of a certain tract of land that absorbs some amount of carbon, you say you have neutralized your carbon footprint. As a first principle, this is not something we believe in.

Therefore, without doing offsets, we want to be net zero by 2040. Now, the good thing is that many companies, many businesses across the world, are committed to similar net-zero commitments. However, the fact of the matter is - and I think the latest IPCC report also says this - even if all the businesses do the maximum they can, and more, it is not going to be enough. It is not going to be enough to keep temperature rise within the limit of 1.5 degrees centigrade, which is what the scientists want as a threshold. Because the nature of the climate change problem is such that all kinds of things are intertwined.

Therefore, when we articulate our climate change program and what we are seeking to do therein, we write it in this way - we do not say we are going to achieve net zero emissions by 2040, because that is actually a meaningless statement. Rather we say that we will contribute to the planetary goal of mitigating climate change by becoming net zero in our own operations and supply chain by 2040. Note the shift in emphasis to just contributing. That contribution will typically be a very small part of what is needed overall; but that is the most accurate and appropriate way of qualifying what we do.

When companies talk about their impacts or their theory of change, they must frame it against the larger picture so that it presents a balanced perspective of what is actually happening. All this is a sort of preamble of how we are looking at impacts and impact assessment.

Samuhik Pahal: You are posing a larger question about what is impact and therefore teasing out the differences between impact and outcome. Secondly, you are saying that this impact must be seen in the context of

the larger ecosystem, and not only in the context of the programs and projects that a specific Foundation or CSR initiative might be undertaking. So, in that context, if we think from an ecosystem perspective, rather than a program-based perspective, what role do you think funders and funding agencies can play in setting up enabling narratives and in bringing in values that are marginal now but need to be foregrounded? What is the role of funding agencies in building this larger ecosystem that facilitates learning and growth?

P. S. Narayan: Starting from the point of program design, funders must be clear in their own minds and make it clear to the grantees and other players, that there should not be an obsession or a fixation with metrics and quantification. I think especially in the CSR context, there is a great anxiety for companies to quantify and show metrics. That does not mean that there is no role for numbers. Numbers are an important part of the overall story. However, they are not the whole story and need to be qualified against the larger narrative. What the numbers do not reveal - the nuances of the story - have to be teased out.

One way to do this is of course by speaking to the right people. These include the wide range of people who have been impacted, or who are supposed to be impacted, and other stakeholders. For example, the community with who you are doing a primary health program that tries to reduce infant mortality rate - if you speak to them year after year, over a long, extended period, you might get a very different picture than what a snapshot at a particular point of time provides. The fact that you are having these conversations and reporting on them two years or five years after the program started, helps you capture the trajectory of how the situation on the ground there has changed over this period.

Now, the challenge is going to be that having conversations with these stakeholders,

whether it is within the impacted community, or other relevant players, requires a certain kind of expertise in conducting these conversations. That is not something commonly found in the impact assessment ecosystem we have today. It is easier for somebody to design a questionnaire or a survey, based on certain standard templates. These, of course, have definite value; because you are documenting something.

Especially in the CSR context, there is a great anxiety for companies to quantify and show metrics. That does not mean that there is no role for numbers. Numbers are an important part of the overall story.

However, I think it is more difficult to have conversations that get into nuances, conversations that take place over an extended time-period, and then try to draw some conclusions. That, I think, in practical terms, is the real challenge.

Samuhik Pahal: We can address many of these issues, if we have our values right. What are the ways in which funding organizations can reorient themselves with respect to values such as environmental sustainability and respect for all persons and communities, and, therefore, start thinking about how to practically operationalize such value shifts in program designing processes?

P. S. Narayan: Again, there is no single answer to that. The answers depend on the domain, the regional geographies and so on. Let me focus on the domain of ecology that we work on. Because we are primarily an urban centric organization, our focus has been on urban ecology all these years. We have these long running programs in

cities like Bengaluru, where one of our focus areas has been groundwater in the city. If you are trying to look at urban water from a commons perspective, then you have to look at groundwater closely in conjunction with lakes, as they all are actually part of an interconnected urban water ecosystem. Therefore, what we have been trying to do is to look at the issue of urban water systemically. This is critical if you are trying to solve the problem of water scarcity, which is endemic in many of the peripheral areas of Bangalore, including Sarjapur and the entire Outer Ring Road.

We are trying to bring in a science-based understanding of groundwater. This means that you will have to do very detailed, granular aquifer mapping at a very small scale... in areas of 30-40 square kilometres. It is only by doing that kind of rigorous work over a long period of time that you can bring in a certain scientific understanding of groundwater. This is slow, gradual, long-term work. It involves experts - you need hydrogeologists, and other scientists to be involved. It also involves citizens - who have participated even in technical tasks like measuring groundwater levels.

If one tries to articulate what we are doing to a layperson, or even to a business leader, it would be difficult to communicate in tangible ways that they can grasp. It is not as straightforward as saying, "We have harvested so many million litres of rainwater. And therefore, now, this residential layout has reduced dependence on BWSSB (Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board) to the extent of two months of supply"... Rainwater harvesting is of course a very important strand of work in the domain of water. Moreover, it is easily understandable for many people.

However, the kind of work we do on groundwater is systemic and more indirect. We tried this approach right from the beginning, and I think we were fortunate that

the kind of partners we are working with were evangelizing this kind of perspective rather than a short-term one. What is crucial to understand though is that as an organization we were comfortable with that fuzziness. We have also tried to communicate that fuzziness to the best extent possible, internally to our leaders.

What this translates to in practical terms is that our work on groundwater can never scream out headline highlights. However, that is fine. If policymakers, communities, scientists, and target citizen groups understand the value of the work that we do, that is good enough. One can draw parallels from this in education as well where certain things can be articulated and communicated relatively more easily than others.

Organizations should feel comfortable with fuzziness in some of the aspects of the work, and with clarity and tangibility of some others.

Organizations should feel comfortable with qualitative fuzziness in some of the aspects of the work, and in relatively more concreteness in some other aspects. Unfortunately, most organizations do not feel comfortable with that. They want those headline highlights and those numbers. I think that is where the problem lies.

Samuhik Pahal: How can processes related to impact assessment help us meet learning gaps in the social sector – of individual organizations as well the larger ecosystem?

P. S. Narayan: The answer to that will depend a lot on who is doing the impact assessment and what kind of people and organizations are involved in it. If the people who are doing the impact assessment themselves come with this larger perspective, and that kind of deep domain expertise, then what could

possibly happen is, even if they are given a brief by the company that says, “I want you to focus on these kinds of tangible things, metrics and so on,” they could still bring out the larger story. This could potentially then draw in the company into these other nuanced aspects.

Therefore, the organization that does impact assessment can indeed play a very critical role. They can catalyse a process of creating deeper understanding amongst the funders. They can do that only if they themselves have the necessary expertise, perspective and willingness to be able to go a little beyond their brief and the narrow boundaries of what they have been asked to do.

Most impact assessment organizations would either not have that kind of expertise and perspective or they would prefer to play safe and avoid expending that extra effort, or go that extra mile. What one is trying to do here is educate your clients – the funders - in a broader sense. Therefore, that would require the impact assessment agency to themselves have a certain sense of wider responsibility to be able to want to do that; but the general propensity is to want to play safe.

Samuhik Pahal: So, the way this conversation has evolved, we are talking about a more long-term, qualitative understanding of impact. That has as much to do with studies, as it is about reflecting upon our own lived experience of working in the sector. If we were to request you to reflect upon your experiences of heading social initiatives for such a long period, how would you see the impact of the work of Wipro Foundation in the critical areas in which it intervenes?

P. S. Narayan: Let us discuss our work in the field of education first. We have been doing a certain kind of work in education for the last twenty years or so, through WATIS (Wipro Applying Thought in Schools) and later through Wipro Cares as well. I would like to think that we have been consistent in our approach, which is to look at systemic issues.

While some partners have been with us for a long time - some of our partners have also changed – our approach has been consistent. We have also tried to spread it widely, geographically speaking, across the country.

A very important aspect of our work is that we have tried to develop these networks of mutual learning – whether it is through the annual education forum or through newsletters like this [Samuhik Pahal], or through workshops and so on. I think these networks of practice or communities of practice have had a very positive effect in terms of the ways in which education practitioners have internalized these learnings into their roles. It would have been different if we had a standardized, cookie cutter approach.

To an untrained, external observer, the work that we are doing is the same. That is, we are supporting the teaching of math, science, geography etc. in schools. However, to anyone who understands education well and its nuances would know that these folks are approaching it in a much more thoughtful, integrated manner. Moreover, that, qualitatively speaking, is a key value-add that our programs have brought in over the years.

Is it possible for us to qualify this more sharply? I am not sure, as we haven't done formal impact assessment of our work so far in the manner it is commonly understood. It is only now we are starting out to because of the CSR rules. However, we want to do this in a carefully curated manner. I think it will be interesting for us to qualify what we think is actually happening on the ground and communicate that in a lucid way to a wider audience. We want to do it also so that we have clarity and understanding among ourselves and communicate the same picture to others.

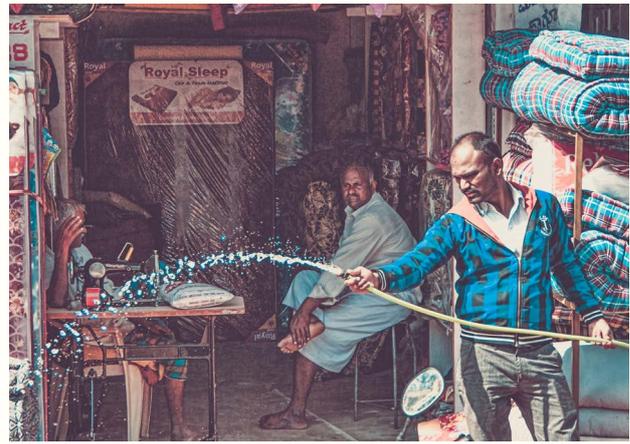
Let us take the example of our work with Vikramshila. We have been working with Vikramshila for more than a decade. The schools, the children and the teachers they

have been working with: “Are they better in some tangible ways than what they might have been otherwise?” While what ‘better’ outcomes mean have to be qualified carefully, this kind of question is difficult to answer unless one has been observing and documenting their work over this entire period. Impact assessment agencies have not been doing that.

As we get into formal impact assessment, I am not sure we will get the kind of answers we seek – especially in a domain like education. We will get many quantitative metrics. However, I do not know whether we will get insightful qualitative perspectives. In ecology, it might be a little easier; but there also as I shared with the groundwater example, it is not entirely black and white, it is fuzzy. Some aspects of ecological outcomes are easier to frame. For example, if we had restored a lake five years back and let us say we want to review the situation today. “Is the lake the same as it was, is it better, or is it worse?” One can frame such questions and hope to get answers that are more easily understandable by a larger audience.

I will wrap this up by talking about our work in ecology in a little more detail. I think what our work in urban ecology has done, is to foreground and bring to the attention of many more stakeholders the interconnections of issues, especially in the domain of water. Take the example of groundwater, which is a hidden resource. Now, because it is hidden and not visible, the ways in which you engage with it, whether as citizens, policy makers or experts, is very different from the ways in which you engage with lakes or rivers.

One outcome of our work, therefore, has been to bring in a richer, science-based, understanding of groundwater. While I would hesitate to say that all Bengaluru citizens understand groundwater with all its nuances, the understanding has spread to a much wider range of communities of practice and residents than before. We want to develop



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and evolve that understanding gradually. At some point of time, we hope it will reach a critical mass.

Because of the CSR Act, we are going to start impact assessment of a few of our projects. Some are in education and a few others are in primary healthcare. We are trying to be very careful in selecting our partners. At this point of time, I am a little sceptical of what is going to come out of it, even if the organizations are well intentioned, which I have no reason to doubt.

Going back to the earlier point about the role of funders, we will have an important role to play in shaping the conversations and thoughts with the impact assessment agencies. We should not have an outsourcing relationship with them by saying, “Here’s the contract. Please try and deliver on these points and come back to us with the results.” We should be involved participants and shape the way impact assessment is looked at.

That is the only way by which the firms that are vested in this space will also evolve and develop a certain level of maturity. The fact that these people are experts should not overwhelm the funder. Funders should not think they have no role and treat the whole exercise as a transactional contract. Companies that are trying to make a difference or are trying to think differently should be involved and participate in the whole process.

Resources to Plan Impact Assessment

Samuhik Pahal Team

Professionals in the development sector recognize the importance of assessing the impact of their programs. However, all assessments require a deeper understanding of impact evaluation and its relation to the intervention and the desired change. To that end, real-world examples and practical guidelines for designing and implementing impact evaluations help.

UNICEF program managers focus on core building blocks such as theory of change, evaluative criteria, and evaluative reasoning. Beyond goals and objectives, they also investigate any unintended consequences. Learn more about their approach [here](#) and watch this [video](#) to learn about the various elements of impact evaluation process and managing its various stages.

The MERL framework is a useful tool to capture the lessons learned from assessments—both positive and negative—and to track the project. ‘MERL’ is an acronym for four related elements of project design and implementation: Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting, and Learning. More information about the framework can be found on Pacific Islands Development Program’s website, [here](#).

Speaking about frameworks, NONIE (Network of Networks on Impact Evaluation), established to enhance impact evaluations among development professionals, provides an approach for aligning impact assessment methodologies and designs with programs and policies.

Consider referring to their framework [here](#) to sharpen your research design. Both are useful frameworks when presenting your projects to funders.

While impact evaluation has traditionally been led by donor agencies, more and more donors are realizing that active involvement of target groups in impact evaluation can create long-term impact.

For many organizations, one of their primary concerns is how to engage partners, beneficiaries and stakeholders in a respectful manner, while also leveraging and developing local evaluation capabilities.

You can refer to [this document](#), which has been utilized by USAID missions to provide practical guidance in the areas of planning, commissioning, and implementing locally led assessments.

Each domain such as education, health, humanitarian relief assistance, governance, climate change, or microfinance, requires applying specific evaluation methods. The 3ie and the Asian Development Bank video lecture series on impact assessment provides an overview on this in addition to covering some of the core concepts in impact evaluation. Watch the videos [here](#) to deepen your understanding.

Over the past years, impact assessment has emerged as a critical component of program development. At the same time, the changing needs of decision-makers, and the decision-making process, have become increasingly complex.

These resources can help us reflect on how far we have come, how we are doing in terms of practise and effectiveness, and on present and future challenges and opportunities.



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Other Resources

World Bank Open Knowledge Repository

[Impact Evaluation in Practice, Second Edition \(worldbank.org\)](#)

Government of Australia

[Choosing appropriate designs and methods for impact evaluation \(industry.gov.au\)](#)

Community Ownership in Evaluation

[Reshape How We Think about Development and Evaluation](#)

3ieimpact – Evidence Maps

[Primary and Secondary Education Evidence Gap Map](#)

MOOC

[Online course on evaluating social programs](#)

Poverty Action Lab

[Online courses on Impact Evaluation](#)

USAID Evaluation Report Template

[Evaluation Report Template | USAID Learning Lab](#)

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Unpacking Impact Assessment

Aastha Maggu

For non-profits working at the forefront of social change, limited human and financial resources often make it challenging to pause and reflect on the impact of their work. However, in the last decade or so, the way in which organizations view impact has evolved. Some of them now actively conduct impact assessment exercises to reflect on their work. In this story, we speak with four education non-profits to understand the experiences, learnings and strategies adopted by them to measure the impact of their work.

Reimagining the Meaning of Impact

Set up in 2005, Bookworm Trust, with a vision to inspire and develop a love for reading as a way of life, runs a library amongst other programs. They extend support to under-resourced schools and communities throughout Goa.

The team at Bookworm understands that it is difficult to measure the scale of the impact of their work in a few months or years. This is because library work and the kind of initiatives libraries undertake is a long-range intervention - like life. The team is convinced that libraries do transform young minds.

According to Anandita Rao, “Questions on whether the work we are doing is impactful does not arise. However, we question how our processes and our planning can be made better so that the library experiences of the children can be improved.”

For the team at Bookworm, remaining fixated on measuring the short-term impact of their work in library spaces and engagements with children is not helpful. Sujata Noronha shares, “We strongly believe that one of the

aims of education is shaping a different kind of an adult in the world. I will know the impact of my educational experience when I am an adult and I look back on my educational experience. Everything in between is just small pieces of the tapestry of a person’s educational journey. I believe that the immediate need to reduce these experiences to certain fixed parameters is not worthwhile.”

Bookworm’s work requires them to collect data around the numbers of books lent out, the attendance of children for the library programs, lending patterns, the types of responses to activities etc. The team believes that these data points in silos have not helped them to evaluate the impact of their interventions. The feedback they receive from the children and the schools they work with majorly helps them understand the impact of their work.

The Bookworm team has actively conveyed its ethos of impact assessment to donors as well. Sujata shared that they have managed to have meaningful conversations with donors where they have conveyed that the data cannot be used to validate the impact of



Bookworm

their work, although it can be used to assess whether work is happening or not.

She adds, “Since the work is library-based, everything is data-driven. It is easy to provide anyone with that information. But it is not meaningful as a measure of how a child is affected, or a community is being empowered, because a library exists in the neighborhood. It does not help to tell anyone that three and a half thousand children borrowed six thousand odd books last month. Unless you know the books, know the children, know their reading journeys, know how they felt about the books they borrowed, and look at this over time closely and intimately - it is simply data.”

Sujata recounted a recent incident where someone approached them and asked how their library programs affect language learning. If they wanted to share information in a numeric form, the language learning skills of the children would have to be tested based on some parameters. This in and of itself is a problem. And then some of the parameters would have to be measured over a period of time. The team believes the act of reading is intrinsically connected to various aspects of language in terms of script, visualization, imagination, inference, interpretation, meaning, etc. These nuances would not be captured in numbers.

Sujata adds, “Most importantly, we are human beings living in societies. Language is not something that happens to me in the silo of school subject / library. Between the time we may test a child first and the time we test them later, life has happened to them, and it will not be fair to ascribe any progress solely to our library interventions.”

Given the need however to articulate what is happening in an academic year, we use some parameters of library work as data points. These include attendance, borrowing rate and pattern, activity in the library, leadership and initiative, and the nature of questions.

One very powerful learning has been the close monitoring of the Book Talk activity. [Book Talk](#) requires the children to talk about the books they read, and their peers can ask them questions about these books. Through a small action research project, the team studied the kinds of books that evoke passionate responses, children tend to be more expressive, etc. These assessments help them understand the stories where the resource persons needed to be still and allow individual reflections.

The Bookworm team periodically undertakes studies that help them reflect on the impact of their strategies and processes. These inputs are used to strengthen their practices and to articulate processes that will eventually lead to positive impacts.

Nudge by Donors to Conduct Impact Assessment

Established in 1987, Shishu Sarothi is a not-for-profit organization working in the area of early intervention and rehabilitation, education, livelihoods, advocacy and awareness as well as protection of rights and legal aid for children and persons with disabilities in Northeast India. The initial focus of the Shishu Sarothi team remained on providing services for children and people with disabilities.

The donors in Shishu Sarathi’s case did not impose a one-size-fits-all approach in capturing impact. Meaningful dialogues between both parties enabled the team to reflect on the usefulness of this exercise.

Sharing inputs on the journey of impact assessment, Ketaki says, “Our biggest donor

in the early days was the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. But they did not request us to capture the impact in a rigorous manner. It was only a few years back, as the donors diversified, the genesis of recording the impact began. It forced us to sit back and reflect on the impact of our work.”

For the early intervention team at Shishu Sarothi, software has been deployed where therapists are required to capture their observations regarding each child. The processes of documenting observations regarding a child’s response to treatment, and to assess its impact, were encouraged by the donors.

Ketaki adds, “This push helped us develop accountability towards our work. It also helped the team gain clarity about our work and its impact. Initially, the team did not see merit in this exercise. Later, when they were able to assess impact, this made sense for them.”

Ketaki recounts that when the team started leveraging logframes, and documenting experiences of stakeholders, they were able to gain clarity about the outcome and impact of their efforts. The team adds that it would be helpful if the assessment formats were designed collaboratively with the donors. A comprehensive Grants Results Framework of a donor enabled the team to implement their interventions and understand the outcomes with more clarity.

The donors in Shishu Sarathi’s case did not impose a one-size-fits-all approach in capturing impact. Meaningful dialogues between both parties enabled the team to reflect on the usefulness of this exercise.

Leveraging Data to Measure the Impact

Mantra4Change is a Bangalore-based organization founded in the year 2013. Mantra is an acronym that stands for Maverick Association for Novelty, Transformation, and Radical Augmentation.

The Mantra team closely works with the school leadership, teachers, students and the parent community at large to drive systemic transformation in education.

Aileen Chen, Khushboo Awasthi, Revathi Menon and Rucha Pande from the team joined us to share Mantra’s journey on capturing the impact of their work. They shared that Mantra focuses on leveraging existing processes and resources such as the National Achievement Survey and Performance Grading Index by NITI Aayog, among others, to capture information that could be relevant for designing interventions and assessing impact.

The team started its journey in 2013 by directly working with schools. They have now expanded to work across schools at the state level. Khushboo adds, “The pathways and timelines to create impact might change. But the goal of school improvement remains the same.”

Mantra uses ‘most significant change stories’, a participatory, qualitative technique to understand the impact and capture it meaningfully. The stakeholders are asked about the most significant change they have witnessed as the result of an initiative.

They also believe that to measure impact one cannot remain fixated only on the numbers. The focus must be to understand stakeholders’ contributions in driving the impact. The number of parent-teacher meetings or the number of children that they work with is important. But the team shared that continuously reflecting on the behavioral

improvements displayed by each stakeholder is also equally significant. The team values leveraging technology to capture data.

Rucha shares, “When we design our programs, we keep technology and the data we can capture through a platform in mind. We do this to ensure that the data that is generated can become a part of the program itself and is not necessarily a separate activity.”

NGOs must drive their own impact assessment agendas based on a mix of their resources, capabilities, stakeholders, and obligations.

The team has now moved from a data extraction approach to a data generation approach. Earlier when the school leaders used to visit schools, at the end of the week someone from the state or the district office of the Education Department would call them to check on the school visits they completed, school visits left, their observations, etc. In this case, one had to extract this information.

Currently, this exercise is undertaken using a tool where the school leaders capture the observations from their visits on their mobile phones and no extra work is added to their plate. In this manner, capturing relevant data through technology helps the Education Department and Mantra to draw meaningful findings. The team is not required to separately call and check with the school leaders.

The relevant data can be checked on a dashboard. It is being generated and does not need to be separately extracted. Using a set of parameters, both the school stakeholders and the administration assess where schools are performing well, and where they might need support to do better.

The Mantra team has also adopted a user-first approach in designing their data collection mechanisms. For instance, the team tries to ensure that the information that is captured should be easy to collect and useful for each stakeholder.

Mantra uses ‘[most significant change stories](#)’, a participatory, qualitative technique to understand the impact and capture it meaningfully. The stakeholders are asked about the most significant change they have witnessed as the result of an initiative. The Mantra team has embraced the new developments in the field of impact assessment, and they believe that capturing impact is essential for designing robust programmatic interventions.

Building a Value System for Impact Assessment

Gubbacchi was set up in 2015 and it works for the educational inclusion of underserved children and enables migrant communities in urban spaces. The team believes that public education is the only sustainable option for underserved families, and a child’s integration into formal public schooling, with quality learning, will move the needle for this child.

For assessing the impact of its work, the organization’s focus is on each child. For instance, in the bridge program, teachers and facilitators maintain logbooks where they record all the relevant updates. These capture the details of the experiences with the child or the lesson plan or pedagogy reflections. Other observations, such as, how the child performed in literacy classes, a story that touched a child, a phenomenal artwork that the child has done, etc. are also recorded in these logbooks.

Somya Nand from the Gubbacchi team shares that the four powerful values of care and concern for everyone, authenticity, learning to learn, and sharing knowledge, inform

their work and the process of assessing its impact. For instance, care and concern as a value mean that if the team is collecting information about a child, they are respectful about the dignity and privacy of the child and the family. With the 'learning to learn' value, the team has been careful to take a step back and understand what the analysis is showing them. Periodically connecting with the families at frequent intervals for formative assessments of the interventions aids in constant course correction.

Somya adds, "We believe that authenticity also plays a big role. Authenticity is being true to the findings that emerge from the impact assessment. If our interventions are not creating any impact, we must accept that we did not make an impact. It calls for an introspection."

At Gubbachi, communicating through case studies has been the most helpful tool to record the impact of the work. The team realized that it greatly helps them in reflecting on experiences and learning. It enables the team to put a face to what they were trying to capture, and becomes a powerful way of learning. These case studies also aid in capturing the change in culture and in recording the learning journeys of children. Somya adds that the team does not overlook failures and tries to capture these. For instance, they had seen one of the children they worked with getting married early and attempted to capture their learning around it as well.

The Gubbachi team is currently conducting an impact assessment through an external agency. The team views it as a self-reflection exercise to understand where they are in their journey and how the programs are progressing, etc. Somya shares, "There is a designer implementer bias. That is why we thought an external agency carrying this out would be helpful. They would not hesitate to

show us the mirror and tell us what is working and what is not. If some aspects are not working, then one must learn from it and do something differently."

At Gubbachi, communicating through case studies has been the most helpful tool to record the impact of the work. The team realized that it greatly helps them in reflecting on experiences and learning.

For the team, one of the most important learnings from this impact assessment process has been ensuring objective communication by the team collecting data to avoid distortion of information. Another learning is the need to institutionalize organizational memory i.e., early establishment of processes and structures for capturing case studies.

The Gubbachi team understands that the impact of their work is intergenerational. They believe that regular reflective processes are necessary to ensure that optimum interventions are rolled out.

Non-profits increasingly see the value of impact assessment. However, one size fits all frameworks imposed by some donors and external assessment agencies are a matter of concern. NGOs must drive their own impact assessment agendas based on a mix of their resources, capabilities, stakeholders, and obligations.

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