Impact Assessment as Shared Learning

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**Impact Assessment as Shared Learning**

**Abstract**

Increased attention directed towards evidence-based aid clearly dominates evaluation discussions within the development community. All development agencies, but particularly non-governmental organizations (NGO), struggle with the requirements for rigorous impact assessments of their project/program interventions. Given the serious operational obstacles confronting impact assessments, any successful integration of impact assessments into ongoing and new NGO programs can gain from the adoption of a shared learning model centered on organizational leadership, people, technology and knowledge. Integrated impact assessment, as shared learning, requires a cultural change within the NGO initiated and maintained by the organization’s leadership.

Key Words: impact assessment, learning organization, evaluation

“We feel we are good, but we cannot prove it.” (p. 182, 1988)

Thomas W. Dichter, Vice President
Technoserve

“Evaluation/impact systems are seen as a threat to jobs rather than as a learning experience.” (p. 255, 1999)

James Roche
Oxfam

“Indeed, out of the 26,285 impact evaluations that USAID conducted between 1996 and 2005, only 30 measured the impact of projects.” (p. 92, 2007)

HELP (Helping to Enhance the Livelihood of People around the Globe) Commission

**Introduction**

Criticisms of economic development programs have received widespread attention in recent years (Binswanger; Easterly; Gibson, et.al.). The recent formation of the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (Center for Global Development) and the J-PAL (Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab), and the earlier establishment of
HAP (Humanitarian Accountability Partnership) and ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action) are four examples of the development and donor communities’ responses to increasing concerns for accountability and transparency in economic assistance programs. Yet with one billion people living on less than $1 per day and 14,000 children dying every day from hunger-related causes, the mainstream debate on the efficacy and efficiency of foreign aid programs remains largely centered on the need for increased resource transfers to promote economic development and enhance global security, not on accountability (Falcon and Naylor; FAO; Sachs).

Some analysts argue that while more resources to support improved technologies, governance reform, and increased access to markets, credit, education, and health care are necessary conditions for economic growth, important cultural changes beyond the normal strategies of mainstream development assistance are necessary to achieve economic development goals (Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales; Harrison and Huntington; Landes).

But within the label of needed cultural change, an introspective analysis of needed cultural change within development agencies is long overdue; a transformation founded on evidence-based aid.

Formal evaluations and impact assessments of development program activities remain an underdeveloped component in most organizational cultures. The complex and intangible characteristics of economic development present unique challenges to evaluation efforts. For this reason, most project evaluation activities center on the lower left hand corner of the assessment design matrix in Figure 1 (monitoring and evaluation (M&E)). This matrix captures the tradeoff between what is to be measured in an assessment and the level of confidence desired in the evaluation. For example, an
adequacy of performance (i.e. provision, utilization and coverage) assessment, often called process evaluation, informs decision makers concerning what went right or wrong during the implementation of the project. Historically, few assessment efforts actually attempt to measure impact or generate a more rigorous understanding of the intervention’s role in enhanced well-being. Development agencies increasingly are called upon by their stakeholders to justify their programs by considering the other five cells in this assessment design matrix.

Impact assessment attributes the changes in people’s lives to a specific project and/or program intervention (Roche). The goal of the information generated by an impact assessment is improved decision making at all levels of the development enterprise. Most recent contributions in the impact evaluation literature recognize the complexity and measurement challenges associated with isolating the contributing factors to economic development (Baker; Mohr; Neubert; Patton; Pitman, Feinsterin and Ingram; Ravallion). These concerns are balanced with the desire or need for greater accountability and stewardship in development programs. A methodologically rich set of analytical tools—surveys, randomization, interviews, direct observation, participatory methods, case studies, and group discussions—are available to the development practitioner. Combined with both triangulation and mixed-method approaches these assessment tools represent valuable learning opportunities in and for the development community.

This paper presents the idea that “shared learning” more appropriately captures the impact assessment opportunities within development projects and programs. By building up a “learning community” within and across non-governmental organizations
(NGO), evidence for the efficacy and efficiency of these programs will emerge naturally.

The next section of the paper outlines the obstacles to impact assessment, or shared learning efforts, in the NGO community. The paper then explores the learning organization literature and proposes a shared learning system for development NGOs. The paper concludes with a proposal for greater use of mixed-method triangulated learning and a technology-based mechanism for diffusing information and enhancing learning within the NGO community.

**Barriers to Impact Assessment**

Most evidence of positive impact of NGO development programs is anecdotal in nature. The lack of organizational commitment to continuous impact assessment may be attributed to the uniqueness of NGO interventions. NGO-implemented projects often are multi-dimensional, community-based, and smaller in scale. However, fundamental barriers exist across all types of development programs (Bamberger, Rugh and Mabry; Argyris). Although these obstacles can be overcome, at least in part with appropriate organizational cultural change, each barrier presents a significant challenge to improved accountability and effective stewardship through impact assessments.

*Budget.* The benefit-cost ratio of impact assessments often is called into doubt by development practitioners. Evaluations are seen as a bureaucratic requirement that provides little benefit to the NGO and even less value to the project’s participants. This suspicion generally emerges from the “tack on” nature of the assessment at the end of a project’s implementation cycle.

*Time.* Both budget and time barriers are used to justify the low priority impact assessments have in the development community. Buying more time may or may not be
possible. Often the barrier is not more money but overworked field staff who cannot be released from valuable operational responsibilities to participate in an assessment. Little organizational attention is given to how impact assessment activities can be (1) nearly seamlessly integrated into daily operational responsibilities and (2) simplified to save time. In many NGOs, practitioners face serious time conflicts associated with program policies (e.g. relief vs. development). The tradeoffs between urgent program implementation and less-urgent impact assessments are not easily reconciled within the organization.

Data. Project data may not exist or data may be unreliable. The lack of reliable baseline data on target participants represents the most significant barrier to impact assessment. Baseline data on a comparison or non-project group (i.e. the counterfactual) is even rarer. Any efforts to evaluate the impact of a project intervention are severely limited without qualitative or quantitative information on participants and non-participants at the beginning of the project (Figure 1). In addition, NGO programs by their very nature promote qualitative components of human development (e.g. increased cooperation, improved governance, greater family harmony) that present their own unique measurement and assessment challenges.

Political. Underlying stakeholder values may create “wicked” analytical challenges in any impact assessment. Stakeholder interests may be exercised in a manner that erects a political barrier for the completion of an accurate and useful evaluation. Participants, field staff, national and international staff, and donors may not share the same expectations for the assessment. As a result, impact assessments may never be
implemented, may be scuttled at an intermediate stage, or the final report may be ignored at some or all levels in the NGO.

**Fear.** A fundamental human reaction to all forms of assessment and evaluation is the fear of failure. Even outside of development activities, many assessments have been implemented to reveal what a person does not know or what they have done wrong. People take creative means to protect themselves when confronted with the possibility of embarrassment or correction. When individuals fear the outcome of an impact assessment, either legitimately or illegitimately, they erect implementation obstacles, a normal human reaction.

**Ethical:** NGO staff often struggle with the important role of the counterfactual or comparison/control group in impact evaluation. Staff often refuse “to run randomized experiments” on the poor. Practitioners assume their development interventions are creating “obviously” superior results when compared to traditional efforts; but they have limited scientific evidence to support their claims (Center for Global Development).

**Incentives.** Strong and clear incentives encouraging impact assessment activities within development agencies, including NGOs, are virtually non-existent (Gibson, et al.). Most organizational directives center on program/project design and implementation. “Moving the money” can dominate agency culture while serious questions like “What have we accomplished?” and “Did our program make a difference in their lives?” are left to an external evaluation team at the end of the project cycle with few agency staff actually studying, and learning from, the final report.

**Instability.** Political turmoil in developing countries creates an unwelcoming social environment for impact assessment activities. But a far less obvious, but equally
important, instability is the turnover of NGO staff, particularly in-country field staff. Staffing instability challenges any effort to develop and maintain an integrated, on-going assessment capability within the organization (Roche). The development learning process becomes a relatively high cost activity given the high “drop-out rate” of staff.

Intellectual. The final barrier is the ongoing intellectual tension between the deductive and inductive approaches to development learning. The positivist deductive approach starts with existing or new development theory, then generates and tests hypotheses that emerge from the theoretical construct. These results are assumed to be relevant to a wide range of development situations until proven otherwise. Economists and many other quantitative analysts generally practice this mainstream approach to impact assessment. On the other side of the intellectual divide are most sociologists and anthropologists who approach evaluation inductively, generating knowledge and testing theories through the use of case studies, interviews, and direct observation. These more qualitative results can challenge existing knowledge and call for new theory, but their primary purpose is not generalization but an in-depth understanding of the local context.

The tension between these two schools of thought should not be underestimated as an active barrier to impact assessment. Many NGO interventions are complex because they are comprehensive (e.g. health care, education, technical assistance, leadership training), relational (e.g. frequent interaction between the field staff and participants), long-term in nature (e.g. an assistance commitment of greater than five years) and bi-directional (i.e. with transformation taking place in the lives of beneficiaries and staff) so debate surrounding the appropriate impact assessment tool(s) rages on within the development community.
Impact Assessment as Shared Learning

Learning can be defined as the change in knowledge and behavior due to realized or unrealized expectations. A recent publication by the Center for Global Development (CGD) has the title “When Will We Ever Learn?” in which the authors lament the lack of learning within the development community. The “add-on” nature of impact assessments in development projects and programs over many decades may have contributed to limited learning (McLagan). CGD proposes a renewed emphasis on impact assessment (including greater use of randomization). Yet only with the establishment and maintenance of a learning culture within and between development organizations, as is argued in this paper, can the development community expect impact assessment to perform its integral role in efforts to mitigate global hunger and poverty.

The seminal works by Senge and Argyris challenge all forms of organizations to overcome their “learning disabilities” in order to become world-class organizations. Learning disabilities may be due to the lack of trust, commitment, and even love within an organization (Kline and Saunders). Learning is constrained within these bureaucracies when individuals take little responsibility for reaching organizational goals or blame external influences for their lack of performance. Relatively too much managerial attention is given to short-term shocks in these organizations’ operational environments rather than to the gradual, long-term trends that undermine organizational effectiveness. Learning disabled organizations discourage collective inquiry, risk taking, collaboration and cooperation, and fail to encourage creative thinking.

What does shared learning look like in a learning organization? Preskill and Torres argue that shared learning should be fully integrated into the organization’s day-
to-day activities. Secondly, assessment is not an “add-on” but rather an integral, ongoing process that becomes part of the organization’s culture. Thirdly, collaboration at all levels in the organization is a hallmark of shared learning. And finally, the organization values learning and improvements. A shared learning culture will emerge when:

- the leadership is pro-active, not reactive to its environment,
- the leadership models learning,
- information is shared within the organization,
- asking questions and encouraging dialogue are valued activities,
- there is widespread trust within the organization,
- staff understand that calculated risk-taking is encouraged,
- collaborative work is highly valued,
- assessment is viewed as an opportunity to learn, rather than a threat,
- evaluation is seen as a continuous activity, and
- people welcome appropriately designed data collection activities.

Given the complexity of learning within an organization, integrating shared learning (i.e. impact assessment) into any organizational culture requires a systems approach (Marquardt). Figure 2 captures a simplified systems approach for NGO shared learning. First, a NGO shared learning environment requires that NGO leadership establish impact assessment as an integral part of the organization’s vision, culture, strategy and structure. The full integration of impact assessment in the day-to-day life of any organization is overwhelming, if not threatening. Nevertheless, the dual responsibilities of stewardship and accountability should be at the forefront of any NGO activity.

The second subsystem is the people. People are everyone from poor program participants to wealthy donors who have an interest in the NGO’s activities. Efforts are made to include all interested parties in the learning process. Learning fails to “trickle up or down” in the organization when impact assessment studies are the “personal
possession” of the assessment team and the manager requesting the evaluation. Ideally, assessment information should “trickle-up” through the program, starting with the beneficiaries, so everyone in the development process has an equal opportunity to learn (Narayan).

The third component of the shared learning system centers on emerging learning technologies available to the NGO practitioner. The technology subsystem includes the information management tools taken for granted in developed nations: video conferencing, email, Skype, web-based classes, e-journals, etc. While bandwidth and other technological obstacles currently constrain the use of these tools in many development contexts, learning organizations should be at the forefront of pioneering the adoption of appropriate learning tools to enhance the effectiveness of poverty reduction programs.

Knowledge, the fourth subsystem of the shared learning system, reflects how the NGO creates, analyzes, stores, analyzes, validates, diffuses and applies knowledge. Although working in most of the cells in Figure 1 may appear intimidating, there exist a wide range of analytical approaches that facilitate greater knowledge associated with the performance and impact of NGO interventions (e.g. Bamberger et. al.; Ezemenari, Rudqvist and Subbarao; Mark, Henry and Julnes; Neubert; Operations Evaluation Department; Roche). One overlooked approach in the evaluation “wars” going on in the development community is the greater use of mixed-method, triangulation in assessment strategies (Figure 3). Mixed-method cross-checking produces a valuable balance of qualitative and quantitative approaches in assessment design. Inductive and deductive research tools become complements rather than uneasy competitors. The knowledge
generation activities of the NGO, appropriately constrained by budget, time and human resources, determine the degree of emphasis placed on each corner of the two triangles. Combined with the impressive inventory of assessment tools available to the development practitioner, the mixed-method triangulated approach provides the analyst with adequate choice and flexibility to transform an NGO into a learning organization.

**Conclusion**

The central argument in this paper has been a call for the integration of shared learning (i.e. impact assessment) into the day-to-day operations of NGO programs. Decision making is improved when learning practices are embedded into management and work processes. Shared learning can increase the opportunities for greater programmatic accountability and resource stewardship (i.e. evidence-based aid).

The often-heard claims that impact assessment cannot be conducted in NGO programs or that only statistically rigorous assessments produce useful information should not discourage continuous and appropriate evaluation activities. NGO programs by their very nature feature complex, intangible variables challenging any measurement effort. However, the methodologically rich portfolio of qualitative and quantitative impact assessment tools creates the opportunity for the development practitioner to customize their analytical approach to their unique field circumstances. The realistic tradeoff between “What do you want to measure?” and “How sure do you want to be?” provides a valuable, initial decision framework in assessment design.

Finally, impact assessment as shared learning requires the participation of all interested parties and the widespread sharing of information. In an era of ubiquitous learning technologies, development practitioners should find mechanisms for sharing
their knowledge with others. Ten years from now, the development community should not be asking the question “When Will We Ever Learn?”

References

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Figure 1: Matrix of Assessment Designs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adequacy</th>
<th>Plausibility</th>
<th>Probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change is of expected direction and magnitude</td>
<td>Changes appear to be more beneficial in the intervention group than the control group</td>
<td>Changes are more beneficial in the intervention group than the control group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities are implemented as planned</td>
<td>The intervention group appears to have better performance than the control group</td>
<td>The intervention group has better performance than the control group</td>
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**How Sure Do You Want to Be?**

Adapted from Habicht, Victora and Vaughan (1999).
Figure 2: A Shared Learning Model

Source: Adapted from Marquardt (2002).
Figure 3: Mixed-Method Triangulation for Shared Learning

- Other Interested/Knowledgeable Parties
- Participants and Participants’ Data
- Field Staff and Field Staff Data
- Other Accessible Data

Qualitative Analysis
Quantitative Analysis