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PARTICIPATORY MONITORING AND EVALUATION FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN PROJECTS

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In a recent discussion on the GP-NET about a World Bank workshop on Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation for Community-Driven Projects, Chanya Charles, who is on the Research and Reference Services Project as a Research Analyst for USAID's Participation Initiative, wrote: "While there were many exercises aimed at creating a participatory evaluation framework, the same confusion and questions arose throughout the two days. What makes participatory evaluation different from a "good" traditional evaluation? What is the purpose of the evaluation? Who is the evaluation for? Who is supposed to participate? When? To what extent? Also, if we agree that participatory evaluation is a good thing, how do we find harmony among all the stakeholders in the evaluation process?" Françoise Coupal, founder and director of Mosaic.net International, Inc., addressed these questions in the following article. Based in Ottawa, Ontario, Mosaic.net International, Inc. is a private sector firm committed to providing innovative solutions to development.

I think there are many myths about participatory development. The two most important that I hear over and over again are that participation takes time and is costly. I think we need to get some hard data on the table before we accept such arguments. My experience has been the opposite. Participation can save valuable resources by ensuring, for example, a relevant project design or sustainability of development actions through early buy-in and commitment. How many costly missions have occurred because a project was not appropriately designed or became irrelevant by the time it was approved? How many well written, yet inaccessible, traditional evaluations for field project staff does it take before we are bold enough to try something new and innovative?

We really need to become more creative and innovative, and donors have to be much less afraid to experiment and be iterative. That means rewarding "risk" and project officers and managers who dare to try something new. That means not always having all the answers to the questions, which brings me to Chanya Charles' E-mail in which she asked some of the following questions:

1. What makes participatory evaluation different from a "good" traditional evaluation?
2. What is the purpose of the evaluation?
3. Who is the evaluation for?
4. Who is supposed to participate?, and
5. When and to what extent?

I will try to respond to a few of the questions.

1. Participatory evaluation is a different animal, if you can call it that, than a traditional evaluation. As one person at the workshop said, in a participatory evaluation project beneficiaries are in the driver's seat. They determine the evaluation questions, participate in the collection of data and its analysis and present the findings. I have seen a lot of well written traditional evaluations, but they serve a completely different purpose for the most part. The donor usually defines the terms of reference and many times the methodology. The purpose of the evaluation is first and foremost to serve an accountability function to ensure that funds have been well spent. They rarely are participatory. As for good, that depends on one's perspective. In a recent plenary session in Haiti, the following comments were made by 36 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community groups about evaluations in general based on their experiences:

- "There is no dialogue or flexibility;"
- "Does not take into account the reality in the field;"
- "Evaluation tools are not adapted to fit the context;"
- "Ignorance by evaluators of the project realities and challenges;"
- "Determines the financial future of the project;"
- "Predominance of institutional interests versus the field;" and,
- "Lack of follow-up."

The drawings were more amazing.

- In one, an evaluator is facing a project recipient holding a report card in his hand.
- Dollar signs and computer technology abounded in another diagram.
- In yet another, there was a big eye looking down from afar and a balance/scale with a lot of question marks underneath.

The definition I like to use with regard to participatory evaluation is one I developed with Jennie Campos for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and is as follows:

"Participatory evaluations involve the collective examination and assessment of a program or project by stakeholders and beneficiaries. Participatory evaluation is people-centered whereby project stakeholders and beneficiaries are the key actors of the evaluation process and not the mere objects of the evaluation. Participatory evaluations are reflective, action-oriented and seek to build capacity by: (1) providing stakeholders and beneficiaries with the opportunity to reflect on a project's progress and obstacles; (2) generating knowledge that informs practice and leads to corrective actions; (3) providing beneficiaries and stakeholders with the tools to transform their environment."

2. I see multiple purposes in participatory evaluations:

- Build capacity of stakeholders to reflect, analyze and take action;
- Development of lessons learned that can lead to corrective action by stakeholders;
- Accountability to stakeholders, managers and donors; and,
- Development of lessons learned that help program staff to improve program implementation.

Each project may be different, and there may be tensions between these functions, especially where donors want the evaluation just for accountability purposes.

3. In the past, traditional evaluations have mainly been for donors with very limited value for the project, although most evaluators would probably like to think otherwise.

4. & 5. As to who is supposed to participate and when, these are better left to the particular project. It all depends on the local commitment to participate in a participatory evaluation and the availability of human and financial resources. We should be careful not to have all the answers. Otherwise, there is the danger of moving back to the blueprint approach of the past 20 years. We need to be much more iterative in development, adapting approaches and methods to fit the situation at hand.

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