THE BENEFITS OF PROJECT EVALUATION: REVISITED

Ottawa, 1974

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The Benefits of Project Evaluation: Revisited

"The Benefits of Project Evaluation: Revisted"

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Review of December Paper
"The Benefits of Project Evaluation"

In the background paper on project evaluation tabled at the December staff meeting, I took the view that project evaluation must focus primarily on measuring and evaluating the degree of success in achieving the original objectives of the project. The first step then is to spend time carefully defining the objectives as specifically as possible and in such a way as to facilitate later measurement and evaluation of project achievements. The following five general types of questions were presented as being desirable elements in a project proposal.

Project Proposal

1. Why is the project important?
   Is it a priority for the country, the government?

2. Who will benefit and in what way? How soon could the results of this research project benefit the rural population?

3. What previous research has been done in this area and what is the relationship of this research to previous research? What coordination and cooperation will there be between this research project and other similar research work being conducted elsewhere?

4. What are the expected obstacles to success in this research and the probability of success?

5. What other research work would be needed to allow successful application? Is there a systematic approach to the whole topic of which the research project is one facet? What would be the spin-off effects or second generational problems of a successful application to the rural community?

While these questions can certainly not always be answered in a research proposal, they represent a good exercise for both IDRC and the proposed grantee. They require some consideration of who the actual target group is and how and when it will be affected. Secondly, what is the relationship of this research project to previous research and to similar research being conducted elsewhere.

The research project should be conceived of as fitting within a broader framework. The following diagram was presented as a visual illustration of this framework.

Previous Research	
Project and (Project Efficiency	Network of related research
Follow-up Research	
Target Benefit Group	

There was a section on cost control which could be achieved in the project proposal stage by developing typical project budgets as a guide.

The emphasis of the December paper was thus on the critical importance of the format of the project proposal as a basis for evaluation. The paper emphasized three elements as important components of the project proposal:

　　　i) budget control;
　　　ii) efficiency (methodology and network linkages; horizontal);
　　　iii) effectiveness (objectives, impact potential on target groups: vertical).

Finally, it was suggested that a first step in developing project proposals to be more amenable to evaluation would be a paper outlining, for interested institutions, the areas that AFNS would like to be considered in a project proposal. A paper outlining the AFNS approach and priorities was prepared by the Director and was distributed at the December meeting.

The discussion on evaluation at the December meeting raised many interesting questions and revealed some consensus on what issues should be taken into account even if there was not always agreement on how they should be considered.

There appeared to be agreement that an evaluation program is essential and that evaluation should be for the benefit of both IDRC and the grantee institution. Sharing the results of an evaluation with the grantee creates a problem if evaluation is carried out by IDRC staff or other outsiders and policy recommendations are made which would adversely affect the recipient institution. Thus it may be necessary to say one thing to IDRC and another to the grantee.

The Objective of Evaluation

There was some differences on what the objectives of evaluation are and one speaker distinguished between forward and backward - looking evaluation, the difference being due more to the focus and purpose of evaluation rather than the procedure.

The objectives of evaluation could be defined as: 1) to determine any desirable changes in IDRC policies and practices; 2) to determine the desirability of continuing support not only for the particular project being considered but for other similar research projects; 3) to develop the critical faculties of IDRC and research project personnel; and 4) to encourage an ongoing dialogue within IDRC and between IDRC and the project institutions.

The Composition of an Evaluation Team

There was considerable discussion on the who, when and how many should be involved in a project evaluation. Suggestions on who should be on an evaluation team included the project officer, another IDRC staff member, an outsider or a staff member from the recipient institution or government.

It was pointed out that there were a number of problems in selecting an outsider including finding and then "educating" the outsider.

Including a staff member of the recipient institution on an evaluation team might make the grantee more amenable to cooperation with an evaluation but it would likely still require a separate report by the IDRC officers for IDRC's use. Assuming evaluation is to be an "in-house" operation, then should it include both the project officer and another IDRC staff member? The project officer can contribute his technical expertise and knowledge of the institution and staff and the project's development while the other IDRC staff member can provide a fresh viewpoint. It was suggested that evaluation should be an ongoing activity and that a proper evaluation of the development of the institutional and human capabilities of the grantees requires an understanding of the situation at the institution before the project is accepted. Thus, evaluation of the efficiency of a research institution must be on a relative basis. Did we contribute to efficient management of the institution or did we pick an efficient institution in the first place? This suggests that the role of the project officer is crucial to a proper evaluation.

It would probably be worthwhile experimenting with several approaches. The project officer can provide an evaluation based on his regular monitor visits while the other IDRC staff member could visit the project independently after a review of project files, progress reports and discussions with the project officer. The IDRC staff member was viewed by one as a catalyst, a person who would pose the right questions to both the project officer and the project personnel.

The Timing of Evaluation

There were suggestions that evaluations should be conducted either during the middle of a project, at the end or at both times. The timing could also be subject to flexibility. If it is a new type of activity, or involves a new approach by IDRC and a number of similar projects are being considered, then it would be worthwhile to conduct a mid-term evaluation especially if it is a long-term project. The purpose of evaluating would vary somewhat depending on whether it takes place at the mid-term or penultimate stage of a project.

Mid-term evaluation can serve a very useful purpose in contributing to the development of the recipient institution's critical approach and encouraging the recipient to focus on problem areas, etc. On the other hand, some small projects would probably not be worthwhile evaluating at all other than by the project officer. Assuming that AFNS continues to manage about 75 projects at any one time with an average duration of three years, visiting each project only once would require 25 evaluation trips a year visiting projects nearing completion.

An evaluation team should visit a project when the management committee is meeting or an internal evaluation is being conducted when the outside team would be most useful for their evaluation and would cause the least disruption.

Complications in Evaluation

Objectives

While it was generally agreed with the contention in the paper that evaluation must be based on the original proposal objectives and the often different IDRC objectives, it was pointed out that proposal objectives change while the project is being conducted, that one must distinguish carefully between objectives and methodology and that there are subsets of objectives within the broad project objectives. If objectives are changed, they should be consciously changed?

Varying Evaluation Standards

AFNS supports a number of projects which are so different in nature and scope that it is not possible to develop a uniform evaluation procedure. Similarly, the quality of the recipient institutions, the duration of the project and the nature of its objectives require differing evaluation standards.

Network Evaluation

One interesting comment was that projects should be considered within

a network since AFNS is supporting more projects that fit logically into different networks. This may be perfectly correct but it makes evaluation more complicated. If a project should not be considered in isolation from the network of related projects, then we will have to move to program evaluation, not project evaluation. This would mean that if evaluation was to be done by IDRC staff members other than the project officer, that one person should be responsible for evaluating all the projects in one network so that projects are not considered in isolation.

Evaluation Procedure

A number of suggestions were also made in the December meeting as to what an evaluation procedure should include, and what it should focus on. Were the objectives achieved and were they correct? What has been the change in terms of technical development and in institutions and human development? The evaluators must be aware of differences in objectives between different kinds of research, between institutions and between the project grantee and IDRC.

The following section presents some specific ideas on what an evaluator would focus on, expanding on the factors such as network creation, technical progress, the change in the quality and quantity of human skills and institutional changes, etc., that were outlined in the original paper, and including some of the suggestions made during the December discussion. While the questions are backward looking because of their emphasis on examining the degree of change, the purpose would be to use the experience of the project to suggest changes in policy and practice to either IDRC or the project personnel. As much as possible the evaluator should also try to get project staff and other interested people to give their evaluation of the successes and failures of the project rather than simply using them for information on which to make his own judgements.

Human and Institutional Changes

There are three significant kinds of change: change in individuals, change in social relationships and institutions, and changes in social

overhead capital which should be considered.

a) Has there been a change in attitude on the part of government officials, project personnel and other people involved with the project?

b) Has there been an improvement in the skill level of management and scientific personnel through formal and other kinds of training?

c) Has the rate of turnover by project staff disrupted the continuity of the project? Are there any changes that could be made in management policy which could reduce this turnover rate?

d) Has the project contributed to the development of the managerial and administrative capacity of the institution and has the management satisfied IDRC's contractual requirements?

e) Has the project management devoted sufficient time to the project? Have senior policy makers, who are in a position to provide ongoing support to the grantee institution and to authorize practical use of project results, been aware of and interested in the project?

f) Have the project research activities been institutionalized within the research institution? Has an appropriate organizational unit been established and given competent staff with full support to conduct the particular research activities?

g) Do these human and institutional factors, skill creation and staff attitudes, institutionalization and coordination with and support from other agencies, suggest that this research activity will continue?

Project Development

a) Was the project slow to get started and was any of this due to IDRC actions or policies? Does the original time frame of the project seem realistic now?

b) What stage of development of project objectives has been reached? Did the stated objectives change and if so, consicously and why?

c) If IDRC's objectives are different from the stated project objectives, they are likely to encompass the project's technical objectives and focus on personal and institutional change objectives. The project's technical objectives are thus likely to be relevant to IDRC as well and it should be possible to determine, measure and evaluate the progress achieved in meeting specific technical objectives.

d) What is the value of the project results to date and are these results being publicized effectively? The value of the project should be seen in relation to the network of related research being conducted elsewhere.

e) How do the people in the target benefit group perceive the project and what value is the project to them? Table 1 attached as an appendix provides an interesting illustration of how the villagers in one Indian district perceived a project and how the project's objectives related to their perceived needs.

The Role of IDRC

a) Was IDRC's role and the restrictions imposed in the IDRC contract clearly understood?

b) Has IDRC policy imposed any serious constraints on the project by the recipient being forced to adhere to the original budget, the timing and method of payment, etc.?

c) What has been the position of the IDRC advisor and was he necessary to the project? Has he played an activist role beyond that envisioned by IDRC policy? Has this impeded or helped the development of host national, managerial and scientific capabilities? Will his departure from the project be a critical factor in continuation of the research effort?

d) Has the time spent on consultants with IDRC staff been useful to the project and should IDRC provide more advisory support?

e) If there were serious managerial and administrative problems, would it be helpful to have an IDRC officer spend more time visiting the project at an early stage to specifically advise on administrative and financial management?

Conclusion

In general, the evaluator should be alert to try to identify the main constraints on project activities (personnel, financial, managerial, political, etc.) and to suggest any way in which IDRC officers could anticipate and overcome these problems in other projects. Experience may show, for example, that it is necessary to insist on a strong coordination mechanism when there are a number of participating agencies in a proposed project, or that the lack of interest of contact with similar research activities elsewhere is sufficiently inhibiting to many smaller institutions that IDRC would want to take this into account when funding other projects.

It would appear from the number of areas of interest listed, which obviously provide only a partial outline of the range of questions that interest IDRC, that it will be difficult to develop a standard format or procedure for sometime. The value of an evaluation study, especially by an IDRC staff member other than the project officer, is likely then to depend critically on his sensitivity and experience.

Table I - Project purposes reported and activities considered important by respondents[1]

| Programme | Respondents reporting | | | | | |
| | What project is trying to accomplish | | Most important need of village | | Most important need of respondents | |
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Improved agricultural practices	386	33	240	20	209	17
Improved seed	237	20	14	1	21	2
Manure/fertilizers	161	14	44	4	73	6
Compost pits	140	12	1	-	-	-
Irrigation	238	20	267	22	191	15
Communications	650	56	199	16	100	8
Veterinary aid	193	17	-	-	-	-
Medical facilities	238	20	22	2	9	1
Sanitation	459	40	102	8	46	4
Education	431	37	73	6	45	4
Cottage industries and employment	16	1	60	5	105	8
Loans	20	2	20	2	72	6
Co-operative societies	54	5	20	2	14	1
Land allotment/land reform	-	-	-	-	153	12
Total number of respondents reporting	1159		1215		1235	

1. Source: Community Projects - First Reactions. Government of India Planning Programme Evaluation Organization, August 1954. This table is taken from page 410 of the article by Louis Moss, "The Evaluation of Fundamental Education", International Social Science Bulletin, Vol. VII, No.3, 1955 pp. 398-417.

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