

In Conversation: Edward T. Jackson and Yusuf Kassam

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Knowledge Shared: Participatory Evaluation in Development Cooperation presents leading-edge analysis on the theory and practice of participatory evaluation around the world. With its instructive case studies from Bangladesh, El Salvador, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, Nepal, and St Vincent, this book provides a guide to a community-based approach to evaluation that is at once a learning process, a means of taking action, and a catalyst for empowerment.

IDRC Reports Online recently interviewed Edward T. Jackson and Yusuf Kassam, the co-editors of Knowledge Shared, about participatory evaluation:

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What was your aim in writing this book? Who is the intended audience?

Jackson: The purpose of the book is to highlight issues and methods in the evaluation of development projects that actively involve local citizens in the evaluation process, and thus better serve those citizens and their communities. The intended audience includes development workers, NGOs, donor agencies, academics, policy makers, and students of development cooperation, among many others.

What, exactly, is participatory evaluation?

Kassam: It's a process of self-assessment and cooperative action in which the stakeholders in a development intervention participate substantively in the identification of the relevant evaluation issues, the design of the evaluation, data analysis and collection, and follow-up action taken as a result of the evaluation findings. This exercise also enables stakeholders to build their own capacity to undertake research and evaluation in other areas.

Participatory evaluation is particularly concerned with ensuring that the voices of the least powerful and most affected stakeholders — local citizens — are heard, and it places special emphasis on poor women and children, the most marginalized groups of all in most societies. This approach uses an eclectic mix of data collection and analysis techniques, both qualitative and quantitative, involving fieldwork, workshops, and movement building.

Many evaluations claim to be participatory but really are not. How do we distinguish between genuinely participatory evaluations and those which merely claim to be participatory?

Jackson: Evaluations that are genuinely and fully participatory ensure that local beneficiaries are actively involved in all stages of the process, from planning and design to data collection and analysis. There must be sufficient time and resources to enable, especially, the poor and marginalized within underdeveloped communities to engage and to make real decisions. They must have voice and leverage. There are still too many evaluation processes that, while consulting citizens, really only extract knowledge from them. Shared power and shared knowledge-generation characterize authentic participation in evaluation.

Is participatory evaluation always the most appropriate type? In what circumstances would it not be?

Kassam: We believe that, because it is tailored to local conditions and culture, participatory evaluation (PE) has very broad application around the world. However, it is not likely to be appropriate or effective, and may even be dangerous, in the context of highly authoritarian political structures and of violent conflict. This said, PE processes have sometimes been used successfully even under these kinds of difficult conditions.

What are some limitations to local participation that participatory evaluators need to keep in mind?

Jackson: In many rural communities, men and women are in the fields for large parts of the day. When there is famine or a severe food shortage and income is scarcer than usual, people can't be expected to stop their income-generating activities to come to an evaluation meeting. In a more general sense, all participants in a PE process make choices based on their assessment of the opportunity costs of participation. They rightly expect great benefits — tangible results, eventually — in return for their participation.

Another problem is that in some communities, it's against cultural norms for, say, women to speak out independently in public. Also, those who are poor and indebted to local elites cannot be expected to speak up and contradict the views of those elites when they will often pay a personal price for doing so. These are but a few of the many limitations to local participation.

What are some practical advantages to participatory evaluation?

Kassam: First, participatory evaluation is itself a development process, one which builds the skills and capacity of the people engaged in it. Second, local beneficiaries are more motivated to participate in an evaluation that values their wisdom and treats them as subjects of the evaluation process, rather than as objects. Third, participatory evaluation can produce rich and authentic insights and information on the benefits and impacts of a development intervention from those whose lives have been most directly affected by that intervention. Fourth, participatory evaluation promotes local ownership of development projects. This is important, given that experience has shown that local ownership is very likely to lead to better and more sustainable results from these projects.

What special skills does the participatory evaluator need?

Kassam: Most important of all are facilitation skills, which enable the participatory evaluator to create a process and an environment that allow each stakeholder to speak freely and learn productively. In addition, a participatory evaluation needs to have a strong belief in the capacity of the poor and disadvantaged to produce accurate and useful knowledge, analyse it, and take effective action based on that knowledge.

How does participatory evaluation challenge mainstream social science? To what extent have mainstream social scientists learned anything from it?

Jackson: Participatory research approaches are now on the "radar screen" of many social science fields. For example, qualitative research texts in education, social work, sociology, anthropology, development studies, women's studies, rural planning, and urban planning all include major sections on participatory approaches. And there are many evaluation books out now on related approaches, such as "empowerment evaluation", stakeholder evaluation, and appreciative inquiry. Moreover, growing numbers of social scientists in influential agencies like the World Bank and the UN are rapidly integrating PE into their work.

However, the battle lines are still drawn with some — though by no means all — quantitative researchers, particularly in economics and business, who can't bring themselves to value citizen knowledge-production. Ironically, among progressive scholars, there are also some post-modernists who have little time for knowledge generated by local communities. Clearly, there are still debates to be engaged here.

What are some of the key ethical issues raised by PE?

Jackson: One issue, and perhaps the most pivotal, is how to ensure effective voice and leverage for marginalized citizens, such as the very poor, women, minorities, and youth, within marginalized communities. Not achieving this but still calling the evaluation process participatory raises a question of conscience for practitioners. Another ethical issue, to which we briefly alluded earlier, is related to the extent to which participation by ordinary citizens renders them vulnerable to retribution by powerful local interests. The practitioner needs these citizens' participation, but must also find ways to protect them against such responses.

Kassam: At the same time, although we too rarely talk about it, some local participants may try to exploit PE processes or decisions for personal gain, with the result that corruption may poison the development intervention in question. There are sometimes bad citizens in good communities, just as there are sometimes bad professionals, Northern and Southern, in good projects. The practitioner, in particular, must make very personal choices about these and other ethical issues.

Do you see PE having a role outside the development context, say in other areas of social change?

Jackson: There's absolutely no question about this. In Canada, for instance, we see more practitioners every year turning to participatory evaluation in the fields of community economic development, Aboriginal development, municipal governance, social program delivery, and workplace innovation. These trends are mirrored in other OECD countries. Incidentally, some observers have termed Canada's Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples the largest and most comprehensive participatory research and policy process ever undertaken anywhere. We think they're right.

About the Authors

Edward T. Jackson is an Associate Professor of Public Administration at Carleton University and Director of the Carleton Centre for the Study of Training, Investment, and Economic Restructuring. He is also President of E.T. Jackson and Associates Ltd., a management consulting firm that has advised on development projects in 50 countries around the world.

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About the Book

[Knowledge Shared: Participatory Evaluation in Development Cooperation](#)

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