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Towards a meaningful evaluation for project staff and villagers

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- **Objective of paper**

In this paper we give a brief overview of the experience of the Nepal Resource Management Project (NRMP) in its search for an evaluation methodology that is meaningful, not just for project and staff, but also for villagers. We describe how this experience of participatory and self-evaluation led to an improved design of NRMP's general approach to development intervention.

NRMP seeks to enhance the capacity of local community's to manage their resources, particularly in the forestry sector, by improving their problem-solving skills. Villagers build on this through designing, implementing and evaluating action plans relating to such activities as forestry, health, agriculture and drinking water systems. NRMP's process and approach to intervention evolved over time. For instance, our first experience with participatory evaluation (in 1995) revealed short-comings. The main deficiency was that we invited the villagers to participate in our designed evaluation, instead of involving them in the design and planning.

- **The design**

Early in 1996, we defined two objectives for the participatory evaluation. First, we wanted it to be profitable for the villagers. It should help them reflect on the process of village development and help them develop skills for evaluating their own work. The second objective was to collect qualitative and quantitative information to assess the impact of the project processes on capacity development.

We organised two workshops for staff to learn about participatory evaluation, self-evaluation and the facilitation of participatory tools. Based on these workshops, the staff adapted the preselected tools and devised a provisional methodology. We emphasised the idea of 'on the spot analysis' which meant that staff could and should adapt the methodology according to the situation. For this to happen, staff had to understand the principles of the evaluation process.

Community representatives

We wanted to involve villagers throughout the process. Thus we invited villages to send two representatives (preferably a man and a woman) to participate in the two workshops. In the first workshop, we explained the concept of evaluation. Then, we discussed a methodology for participatory and self-evaluation and the role of the community representatives in this process.

In a second workshop, we discussed the first phase of the evaluation, which focuses on defining indicators and prepared for the second phase, when the assessment was undertaken. In a third workshop, after the assessment, we shared our experiences and the outcome of both the participatory and the self-evaluation. Project reports were produced in both Nepali and English, including the self evaluation process and its results.

- **The process**

The following provides a brief description of newly designed tools that we adapted for our evaluation. Table 1 shows the contribution of

each tool to achieving the evaluation objectives.

Imaginary project

The imaginary project tool was used to reconstruct the indicators villagers would use for evaluating activities. We facilitated a role-play: we asked participants to imagine the evaluation team were from a village where no development work had been done. We then asked them to explain to the team the development work which had been undertaken in their village. We asked them to describe how they did it, why, and what would need to be done if it was repeated in a different village. We also discussed activities, objectives and indicators, which were described as 'how they should know if the work was successful'.

After this exercise, we asked the villagers to plan their own evaluation. The community representatives then took over. They facilitated a discussion of indicators to assess the results of their activities (Table 2)

Villagers would often not realise until after the exercises that they were actually making a plan for the evaluation in their own village. Thus the indicator definition was realistic, achievable and not imposed by the project.

Drama

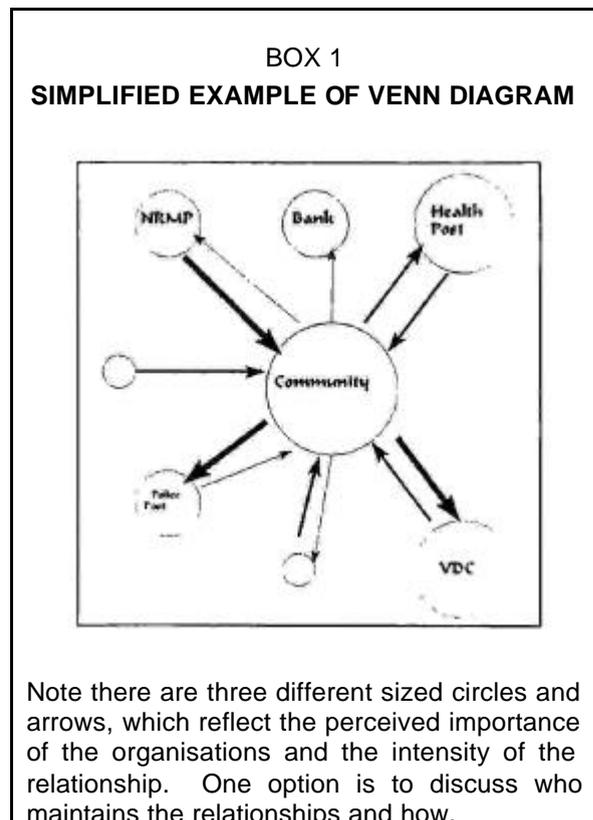
Dramas were used to learn how villagers dealt with conflict resolution and enforcement of rules. We provided a plot about a case of breaking the rules of the forest committee. We observed how villagers would decide and rule on the case.

Historical map

First we asked the villagers to make a map on the ground showing the village five years ago. We then asked them to add new things, represented by coloured powders (including ash, chalk and red soil). Factual information about activities and improvements could be discussed using the map, including the forest plantation and processes that led to change.

Venn diagram

We adapted this tool by placing one circle in the middle representing the community, and asked the villagers to put circles of three sizes around it. These represented the organisations with which they had a relation. The size of the circle denoted the importance the villagers gave to the particular organisation. Furthermore, we asked them to put arrows of three sizes in between the community and the outside organisation. The size of the arrow represented intensity of the relation. They could also decide whether a relationship was two-way or one-way (see Box 1). Initially we asked the villagers to construct the situation before NRMP started work in their village. Then they were asked what new relationships developed and how this process took place since the arrival of NRMP.



Interactive questionnaire

The main objective of this tool was to initiate a discussion of how responsible people felt for the development of their own village. People were asked questions to which they could respond in three ways, represented by posters:

- one showing two inactive persons (a man and a woman);
- one showing two persons hesitant about joining some activity; and,
- one showing two actively working persons.

We asked villagers to go to the poster which expressed best the degree to which they felt responsible for a particular activity.

SWOL analysis

SWOL stands for strength, weaknesses, opportunities and limitations. We asked the participants to share their ideas about what development activities they regarded as successful (strengths), unsuccessful (weaknesses), what had been rendered possible through this work (opportunities), and what they would have liked to do, but which was, at that moment, impossible (limitations). The strengths and weaknesses were then prioritised to find out what they regarded as the best achievements and the biggest failures and why.

Table 1. Characterisation of participatory tools

Tool	Facilitating reflection	Data collection	Effectiveness	Comments
Imaginary project	Yes	No	Very effective for constructing indicators for evaluation after an activity is completed	Indicator definition is best completed at the beginning of the project
Life history	Yes	Yes (qualitative)	Very good impact assessment	Essential part of evaluation
Village history	Yes	Yes (qualitative)	Very good impact assessment	Essential part of evaluation
Historical map	Yes (broad scope)	Yes (qualitative and quantitative)	Many issues can be addressed with this tool: social, economic and environmental	Don't let getting the map drawn make you forget the discussions!
Transect walk	Limited	Yes (qualitative and quantitative)	Very effective if discussions are established	Observation is an essential part of evaluation to cross-checking information provided by other tools
Venn diagram	Limited	Yes (qualitative)	Very effective for analysing linkages	This tool has a real potential
Historical matrix	Yes (broad scope)	Yes (qualitative and quantitative)	Effective for assessing both qualitative and quantitative changes	Takes quite some time. The bigger the matrix, the more people can participate.
Drama	Yes	No	It adds an entertaining aspect to the evaluation	Often we would say when villagers should stop, otherwise they could have gone on for hours.
Songs	Yes	No	Also entertainment value	It helps to 'break the ice' if the project team first sings a song
SWOL analysis	Yes (broad scope)	Limited (qualitative)	It is a whole evaluation in a nutshell	Take care that you use posters that convey the right message
Interactive questionnaire	Yes	No	Good discussions if facilitated in a flexible way	Sometimes a too straightforward tool

Table 2. An example of the format that villagers used for the self-evaluation

Activity	Objectives	Indicators	Result	Elaboration
<i>Information provided through imaginary project tool</i>			<i>Information provided through villagers' discussion, facilitated by the community representatives</i>	
Literacy class	Participants learn to read and write Participants learn new skills	Ability to read simple text and write simple letter Practice new skills that were learnt in class	10 participants could read and write, but 3 have lost the skill. 5 participants started cleaning their houses every day after they learnt about sanitation in class.	There are various other effects of the literacy class, such as women losing their shyness and some women being included on committees (e.g. the forest committee)
Drinking water system	Make clean water available Water sources provided close to peoples' homes Reduction of diseases Provide water for vegetable gardens	Clean water available from taps Water taps constructed in village Fewer people will have diarrhoea Water is used for vegetable gardens (indicates there is enough water)	Five taps have been constructed in the village. One of them is broken. There is enough good water available for vegetable gardens in the cold season only. It is clear that fewer people now suffer from diarrhoea than before.	Broken tap will be repaired within two weeks. There seems to be less water coming from the source (intake). Maybe it is drying up.

• Discussion

We found that it was a good idea to present general concepts (with practical examples) to the field staff but leave the final design of the methodology up to them. It increased staff ownership of the evaluation process. Through feedback on their final plans and the implementation of it, it served as a very practical training.

Tools

We used different types of tools. Some focused mainly on initiating meaningful discussions (e.g. interactive questionnaire), some provided quantitative data (e.g. historical matrix) while others provided a lively impact assessment (e.g. life histories). Semi-structured questionnaires and observations (through the transect walk) complemented this information. The combination of tools with different focuses appear to lead to a broad and balanced assessment. Our flexible approach was a key

to this: if one tool did not work well in a particular village, alternatives were used.

Impact assessment

We cannot give a full account of the evaluation results obtained in sixteen different villages. However, we obtained important data that enabled us to assess the project's impact in key areas. This included quantitative data (e.g. about drinking water systems and fruit tree cultivation), information about social processes and changes (e.g. equity and gender issues) and information about the capacity/potential for continued village development (e.g. planning for the future). We also got some fresh ideas for improving NRMP's approach to development work. Some villagers explained that they appreciated the process as it gave an opportunity for reflection on what had been achieved and what could still be achieved.

Reflections

The participatory evaluation and self-evaluation that NRMP developed over the last two years are a step towards developing meaningful evaluation for the project, staff and villagers. This experience helped us to reassess and redefine NRMP's general process and approach.

- To avoid reconstructing baseline data, we now collect baseline data at an early stage e.g. when a community is selected through a participatory process to work with NRMP and its activities are planned.
- The village level action planning process, facilitated by NRMP, has been enriched by defining objectives for proposed activities and indicators upon which results will be evaluated. In this way, villagers can monitor and evaluate their work from the planning phase. This makes the evaluation experience more valuable to villagers and leads to increased planning capacity and control.
- Through establishing baseline data collection and a monitoring process, the final project evaluation will now be a shorter endeavour. In the future, information will be provided from on-going self-monitoring and evaluation reducing the need for a concentrated evaluation at the end of project involvement. The final evaluation will now focus on the evaluation of complex topics that cannot be monitored at an activity level, such as gender issues and self-reliance.

• Some lessons learnt

- The project's predefined indicators should be assessed critically, and be complemented or even replaced by indicators defined by staff for a realistic evaluation.
- Indicator definition by field staff is a powerful tool for reflection on what the project is really aiming to do. Too often it is taken for granted that staff are familiar with the aims of the project.
- Facts are easier to collect than process information. Training needs to focus on changing the emphasis from collection of

only factual information towards more process oriented (how? why?) information.

- Indicator definition by villagers at the time of action planning will make monitoring and evaluation much easier, leading to the increased control of villagers over these processes. This will relieve the work of the final evaluation.
- Self-evaluation and participatory evaluation should be used together to complement each other and not instead of each other.
- In order to make an evaluation meaningful for project, staff and villagers, it should consist of two components. First it should comprise an assessment of project defined indicators. Second, it should include a qualitative assessment of villager defined indicators.

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