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## From terms of reference to participatory learning: using an evaluation's creative space

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### • Introduction

Conventional evaluations of development projects are generally carried out by external experts, who largely use documented information, interviews and short field visits to gather their information. They are usually guided by terms of reference which leave them with little scope for flexibility or creativity. In this article we describe how a project evaluation in Zimbabwe used the original terms of reference as a basis for a flexible and participatory approach to evaluation.

### • Converting terms of reference to hypotheses

The Small Dam Rehabilitation Project (SDRP) implemented by CARE International aims to improve food security for drought-prone communities in Masvingo and Midland Provinces in Zimbabwe. It helps communities protect small reservoirs and catchment areas and to optimise their use. Part of the project, the rehabilitation of twelve small dams, is funded by the Dutch government, and was due for evaluation in early 1998. Remarkably, both CARE and the Dutch Embassy requested a focused in-depth review rather than a conventional broad-sweep evaluation, and felt that a participatory approach would suit the Terms of Reference (ToRs). CARE's Programme Officer urged the evaluators to use the fullest possible range of participatory methods and to explore beyond well-known techniques such as focus group discussions. CARE then assisted the team leader in finding two local consultants with experience in participatory research. The evaluation team thus assembled consisted of two Zimbabwean

consultants and one Dutch consultant based in Zimbabwe.

The explicit request for innovative participatory methods encouraged the evaluators to take some bold steps. First, they 'translated' the ToRs into a set of ten hypothetical statements (see Box 1), all of which were phrased in the positive. The evaluators' task was to support, refine or reject these statements.

### • Designing a participatory learning methodology

The next step was the challenging one: for each of the first seven of the ten statements, the team conceived a sequence of methods, chosen both for their potential to address the specific issue and for their participatory potential. They also spent two days touring the twelve Dutch-funded dams, guided by senior CARE staff. This helped the evaluators gain an overview of the entire project and identify suitable sites for inclusion in the study.

The evaluators excluded four of the twelve dams from the sampling frame, mostly because rehabilitation measures were incomplete. Of the remaining eight dams, three were randomly selected, while a fourth served as a pilot. A fifth dam belonging to an older CARE project served as a control.

#### BOX 1

#### TEN STATEMENTS ABOUT THE CARE SMALL DAM REHABILITATION PROJECT

**Community level**

1. *Numbers of beneficiaries:* Those benefiting from each small dam in the project area fall into two categories: (1) direct beneficiaries numbering some 1,000 people per dam; and, (2) indirect beneficiaries of about 1,500 people per dam.
2. *Equality of access to project benefits:* Equitable access to a dam's potential benefits is secured by by-laws generated and reinforced at community level (user fees, committees etc.).
3. *Equality of distribution of benefits:* Women, especially poor women, are the main beneficiaries of the project's efforts.
4. *Sustainable management of common property natural resources:* Improved income is a vital incentive to ensure community management and environmental rehabilitation of common property natural resources.
5. *Sustainable management of common property natural resources (institutional aspects):* The project's approach of community management with the local authority is sufficient for dealing with conflict over land allocation and access, etc.
6. *Perceived impacts:* Improved nutrition and income security are the main benefits perceived by users of the project dams.
7. *Exploiting potential benefits:* The project's intention to explore and encourage utilisation of a wider range of economic benefits of the dam and its catchment area is justified given the current under-exploitation of the multiple potential benefits of small dams in the region.

**District level**

8. *Accountability of local authorities:* The project's approach of promoting the role of Rural District Councils (RDCs) as the main agents of change through training and involvement in a project co-ordinating committee is successful.
9. *Capacity development of local authorities:* Project efforts at RDC level complement the national RDC Capacity Building Programme.

**Project model**

10. The project provides an appropriate and cost-effective model for achieving community based common property resource management which merits replication in its current form.

CARE field staff were keen to be involved in the evaluation. They commented on the proposed methodology in a one-day workshop and assisted in the pilot workshop at one dam site and in the subsequent workshops at the other four sites.

All 20 or so community members of the dam related committees (such as the Dam Rehabilitation Committee and the Irrigation Committee) and about 30 other dam users were invited to these workshops. In order to ensure a good representation of income groups and gender amongst the participants, the review team had asked that the 30 'other dam users' would be a representative sample of all users. However the team was not in a position to ensure this, as invitations for the meetings were arranged through project staff. It is thus likely that those living nearby the dams were over-represented and, as is usual in such

meetings, women outnumbered men – on average 50 people attended of whom some 60% were women. The participants were divided into two groups - committee members and other users. Each group had its own programme of three to four issues and was guided by one review team member. The workshops took between four and five hours per site. The (expatriate) team leader was present, but confined her role to taking pictures.

Below is a description of some of the methodologies used in the workshops to explore the first seven statements.

### Statement 6: perceived impact

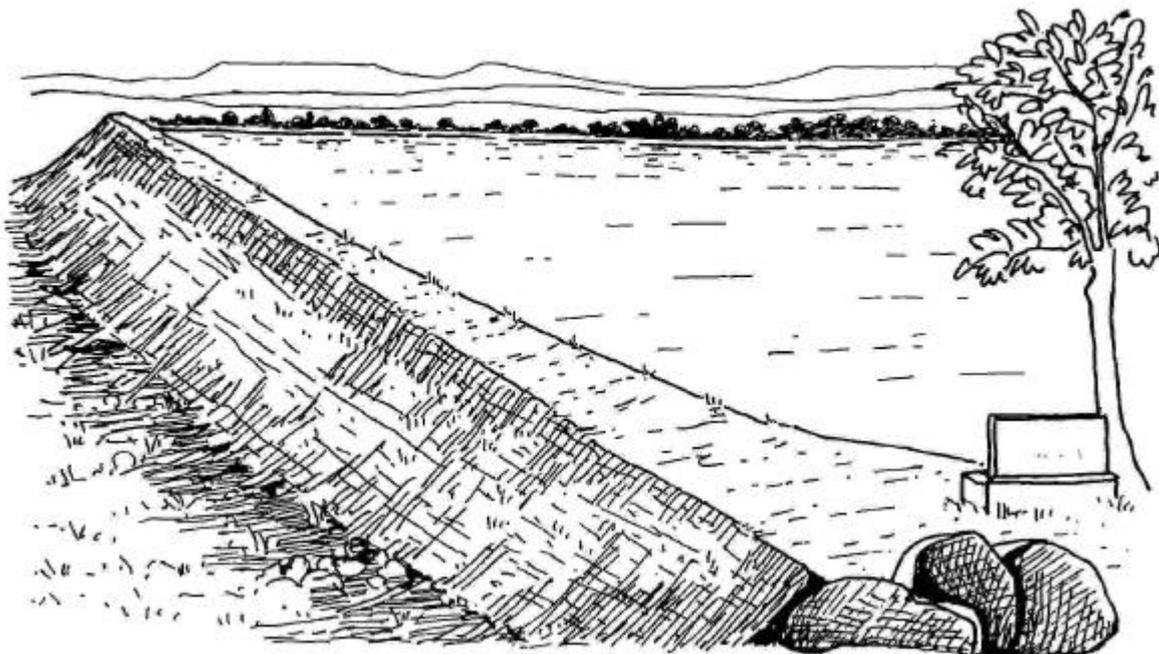
The methodology used here was based on a set of picture posters. This exercise was an 'ice breaker', setting the tone of the meeting with the group of community members not selected in committees. A set of 54 pictures was spread on a mat at the centre of the meeting. These pictures were both 'open' (i.e. multiple interpretations) and 'closed' (e.g. a woman tending a garden; a family having a meal etc.). Participants were then invited to each select the picture that best represented the project's benefits, as they saw them. After a brief initial hesitation, participants started to move and talk and crowd around the mat. After making a choice, they explained it to the rest of the group. By that time, the meeting was lively and full of laughter. The group as a whole then decided which pictures they all agreed represented the project's main benefits. This generated much heated discussion, but eventually this selection was put up for a vote. A helper stuck the pictures on a rock wall or on the back of the car in a way that enabled people to vote in private. The ballots were colour-coded: black for men and white for women. Each short-listed picture had its own

ballot box - a small card box with a hole in the lid. After voting, the pictures were put back on the mat and a participant then emptied the corresponding ballot boxes on them. This gave a strong visual image of the voting results. Since the discussions preceding the vote had been extensive, the results were no surprise and discussion at that point was mostly brief. A helper noted down the results while the meeting turned to the next issue.

Communities' perceptions of project benefits were surprisingly consistent in all five study sites. Of the 54 pictures, only 29 were selected in the initial rounds. These 29 posters represented 12 sorts of benefits. However, once it came to voting, participants in the five study sites consistently shortlisted the same seven issues as the main benefits.

The methodology only allowed one vote per participant. In view of the outcome, it might have been interesting to refine the vote by allowing a second ballot for another perceived benefit. As it is, the vote was overwhelmingly for 'the security of having water nearby' which was depicted in a simple black and white picture of a dam (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. 'Having the security of water nearby' – the main project benefit for most of the voters**



### Statement 1: number and classification of beneficiaries

The flat rock surfaces near the dams proved ideal for mapping the dams' social catchment areas, which was done with chalk, seed and chips of different colours. After the outline by an elder, virtually all of the twenty or so committee members took part in mapping the homesteads, each sub-group working on its own cluster of homesteads. Elderly and tired people now and again withdrew to the shade, but kept coming back to check the results. If there was no physical boundary, the maps turned out very large, up to 160 square metres.

The mapping took about one hour of dedicated work. The results appeared very reliable and have indeed changed CARE's assumptions about project beneficiaries - both in terms of numbers and in the way beneficiaries should be classified. For example, the numbers - nearly 4000 users per dam - far exceeded earlier estimates. The 1500 or so seasonal users (earlier classified as 'indirect users') did not contribute to maintenance works and yet were, for a large part, those with livestock - wealth, in other words. This gave new impetus to the discussion on animal use and its effects and on charging user fees. The mapping was followed by discussions about the next statement - access and reasons for lack of access to project activities. This was now a straight forward activity as participants indicated homesteads on the map and explained why some households have less access than others.

### Statement 3: perceived equality of benefits

Community members not holding posts in any of the committees dealt with these issues as it was felt the group of committee members might have a biased view. The methodology worked towards a vote answering the question 'who has benefited most?'. Ballots were colour-coded for men and women and were cast in private on three sets of three drawings depicting:

- equity in general: a few houses; a moderate number of houses; a lot of houses;
- gender: a group of men only; a group of women; a mixed group (see Figure 2); and,
- poverty: posters were first assembled and agreed by participants, using attributes of wealth such as a picture of a car, a banknote, a full store, cattle etc. Participants attached selected attributes to three identical pictures of a basic house, thus indicating if it was a poor, average or wealthy household. This took about ten minutes to work out and agree on, but gave a satisfactory result without stigmatising labels of poverty. Poor people were correctly depicted as having few or no attributes of wealth but at least were not portrayed in shabby houses or dressed in rags.

Figure 2. Set of three drawings depicting gender used for voting



The three ballots took place one after another, with discussion before and after on each issue. As in the earlier example, participants emptied ballot boxes on the corresponding pictures on the mat in the centre of the meeting, thus making the outcome clearly visible for all participants. The facilitator then would gently probe unexpected outcomes, if any.

#### **Statement 4: sustainable management of common property natural resources**

This topic was a challenge, not least because it concerns an assumption about people's future behaviour. Participants started drawing a time series of three surfaces of their dam at full water level - one as they remembered it from the past; one as it was now; and one as they expected it to be in five to ten years time. Each drawing was done on identical A3 size cardboard, on a scale participants agreed amongst themselves. Participants then cut out the three drawings and stuck them wide apart on a big rock or a wall in full view of the group. This is a so-called 'story with a gap', or, in this case, 2 gaps. The space in between the drawings (or photos or pictures) makes people think about past, present and future of, in this case, their dam<sup>1</sup>.

The discussion started with the first gap: What had happened to bring about the current situation? In some meetings, picture posters induced this discussion, with participants each selecting and explaining uses which had led to siltation, thus making the surface area smaller and differently shaped.

Then, individually or in pairs, they drew action they felt was needed to sustain the dam's life span and water holding capacity - the second gap. The next step was to present the drawings and sort them by issue. This was followed by a vote, using pebbles, on which measures would be most difficult for the community to do by itself. At that time, the facilitator probed the point made in the hypothesis leading to fresh discussions and sometimes even to a second ballot.

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<sup>1</sup> The method can be used for other issues that can be depicted, such as malnutrition, malfunctioning water points, etc.

The outcome of the community level workshops was colourful. It included numerous pictures of the proceedings, drawings, maps and Venn diagrams. The workshops also generated data in conventional tables, the formats of which had been designed beforehand. All these were taken to district-level workshops, during which district staff interpreted the tabulated data. This helped the evaluators address those statements that could not be addressed at community level.

#### **• Reflections**

The main challenge for this review was to satisfy the demands posed by an evaluation whilst keeping the positive aspects of a participatory exercise. This challenge was fulfilled. However, there are pre-conditions for this approach to be successful.

##### *At design stage*

- Focus on a limited number of issues of common interest (see below)
- Meticulous preparation; funding is required to enable proper preparation
- Availability of skilled facilitators with analytical minds and an eye for detail

##### *At community level*

- Content issues of high and common interest (both common within the community and common between the community and the study team).
- Sizeable attendance, but not more than, say, 60 people. Participants should ideally be a representative selection of the target group, but this is difficult to secure.
- Informal, but comfortable settings with plenty of space so that people can spread out and sit in groups. Meetings outside can be spoilt by (the threat of) rain, wind and lack of shade. Crowding and heavy furniture make for an uneasy start of meetings inside.
- Reasonable time demands and respect for people's situation. For example, providing a meal for workshop participants is appropriate as people are hungry after four to five hours of intense discussion.
- Work on issues that can be visualised, or at least have a visual outcome (as in the votes described above).

- Work with issues that are relevant at all levels so that community level results feed into higher level meetings.

## • Conclusion

Having to find evidence to support or refute hypothetical statements can promote creative thinking around clearly defined issues. It makes the evaluators think hard to come up with the best possible methodology using the full range of methods available. Participatory approaches are quite demanding in terms of preparation and thus in terms of fees. Their use in evaluations must be justified. They are particularly suitable for the following types of data.

- Weighed and gender-specific community opinions on benefits and impacts of activities, on access to and use of benefits, and on sensitive issues such as equity and gender.
- Approximate information on local living conditions such as numbers and quality of physical infrastructure and facilities; location and use of resources; number of users.
- Community opinion on project performance and other institutions meant to serve them.
- Community opinion on factors determining common property management.
- Implicitly, the likelihood of continuation of project activities after withdrawal of the implementing agency.

In joint evaluations, participatory approaches stimulate follow-up by the implementing agency. As K.Stevenson, Programme Officer of CARE, Zimbabwe, commented some 18 months after the evaluation:

*“Unlike preceding evaluations, this evaluation tackled only a limited number of issues. However, it was designed to speak with authority on these. The review gave CARE insight into the validity of key assumptions underlying project design. This eventually led to thorough revision of routine approaches where the participatory review proved the assumptions untenable. For example, the outcome of the community vote on perceived*

*benefits made CARE more determined to give priority to dams where project assistance could make a long term difference for water security”.*

CARE’S readiness to draw such lessons was to a large extent a result of staff involvement in the evaluation’s design and implementation. CARE also followed up on the practical lessons that staff had appreciated in the review. For example, methods such as social mapping are now routinely incorporated in the planning and extension process at all dam sites, including those of CARE projects funded by other donors.

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Ink drawings by Juliet Waterkeyn, Zimbabwe Ahead, Harare, are examples of visual tools used in this evaluation. Other visuals were mostly pictures cut out from calendars and promotion materials.

For more details of the methodology, contact the author. A more in-depth analysis of the approach taken is available in Joanne Harnmeijer, Ann Waters-Bayer and Wolfgang Bayer, 1999. *Dimensions of participation in evaluation: experiences in Zimbabwe and the Sudan*. Gatekeeper Series No. 83, IIED, UK. Available from the IIED Bookshop: Email: bookshop@iied.org