



Power and perceptions in participatory monitoring and evaluation

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the assumptions that commonly underpin the design of participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) within development programmes through the examination of a case study of a large rural development programme in Uganda. This case study reveals a mismatch between programme assumptions and participant perceptions, which stymied the implementation of PM&E. In this case, PM&E was based on the assumptions that programme and participant goals were compatible, participants were willing to volunteer and engage themselves for the greater good of their communities, and information sharing and communication was fairly free and open. However, farmers within the programme felt that the bureaucratic and accountability requirements of the programme were not their concern, and were acutely aware of power differences between farmers and programme officials, and between farmers of varying status. The key lesson to be drawn from this case is the need for a heightened awareness of power dynamics and political factors in the design of PM&E.

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1. Introduction

Participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) is often premised on the assumption that programme goals and participants' goals are mutually compatible. Since the ultimate goal of development programmes is typically stated as the improved well-being of the participants, who are its target beneficiaries, this assumption may seem self-evident. And yet it sidesteps the reality of the inherent power differentials between programme implementers and the programme's target beneficiaries. Such power differentials, and their implications for the nature of participation within programmes, have been well documented by other authors (Cleaver, 2001; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mosse, 2005). The purpose of this paper is to explore specifically the implications of such power differentials for the empowerment goals of PM&E. This is done through a case study of PM&E within the National Agricultural Advisory Service (NAADS) of Uganda.

The findings are presented in this paper (following literature review, an overview of NAADS, and a methodology section), in two main sections. The first findings section describes the logic of PM&E from a programme perspective and traces the history of the programme as it was developed and implemented. This section draws mainly on the perspectives of the designers and implementers. The second findings section explains the reason for

limited farmer participation within the PM&E programme, which was a disappointment and a surprise from the programmatic perspective, by contrasting four underlying programme assumptions with the understandings as expressed by farmers participating in NAADS. The difference between programme and farmer perspectives was sustained in large part by the power differential between programme implementers and programme participants. This observation presents a major challenge for the notion that PM&E provides a means to empower participants.

2. Literature review

A central concern of this paper is power, and how differences in power influence the practice of participatory evaluation. The case that power and politics play a key role in shaping evaluation practice and outcomes was effectively argued by Weiss (1973) in her seminal article "Where politics and evaluation meet?" Weiss argued that politics is inextricably embedded into evaluation in three different ways: firstly, the programmes that are the objects of evaluation are the product of politics; secondly, the reports that evaluators produce about these programmes also feed back into political decision-making processes (such as to fund or not to fund). And finally, the act of evaluation is itself political, insofar as it makes inherent judgment about how and against what benchmarks and values a programme can be held to account.

Weiss's analysis was based on the experience of the American War on Poverty programmes of the 1960s and 1970s. Bamberger's (1991) later comparison of evaluation practice and the context in developing countries, contrasted with North American experience, argued that the recognition of the role of politics and of the need to

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involve stakeholders in evaluation was still quite limited in developing countries, where evaluation design and practice continued to be dominated by the needs and interests of foreign donors. Such actors tended to take a more technical approach to things. Ferguson (1994) argued that the technocratic, apolitical approach to development had a myriad of political “side effects” which were in fact the main outcome of such development efforts, although likely to be completely overlooked by evaluations based upon the formal programme logic and objectives.

Even by the time of Bamburger’s article, and certainly since then, the use of participatory monitoring and evaluation, in which the target beneficiaries of an intervention play a role in evaluating it, had become widespread in international development, paralleling the mainstreaming of participation in development (CIAT, 2004; Estrella, 2000; Estrella & Gaventa, 1998). In part, the introduction of PM&E stemmed from the desire to address the unequal distribution of power, and to ensure that programmes meet the real needs of beneficiaries, rather than being driven by the assumptions of programme designers. Such motivation, founded on the ideas of people such as Freire (1970) and Chambers (1995), leads to what Cousins and Whitmore (1998) term “transformative participatory evaluation” or T-PE. They contrast this with “pragmatic participatory evaluation” or P-PE. The pragmatic strand of PE, according to Cousins and Whitmore, links back to the pragmatic democratic ideas of John Dewey and Kurt Lewin, and to later work on organizational learning by organizations such as the Tavistock Institute in the UK (Trist, 1981). Cousins and Whitmore (1998) characterize P-PE as more broadly practiced in countries of the global North, whereas T-PE is more explicitly focused on social justice and empowerment of the marginalized and has its roots in practice and theory founded in the global South. However, in the context of international development, the incorporation of participatory development and PE with “transformative” roots into the policy and practice of such status quo institutions as the World Bank means that the distinction between two schools of PE may be hard to maintain in many cases (Blackburn, Chambers, & Gaventa, 1999).

Further blurring the distinction between T-PE and P-PE, much literature on PM&E within development links an increased interest in using monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as an internal learning tool within development organizations to an ongoing concern with institutionalizing participation (Blackburn et al., 1999; Estrella & Gaventa, 1998; Levin-Rozalis & Rosenstein, 2005). The institutionalization of participation is, on one hand, seen as necessary to maintain and further it as more than a marginal activity carried out in small, short-term projects, but on the other hand, poses risks for its transformative potential. Critiques leveled against participatory development’s claims to deliver “empowerment” to the politically marginalized also pose a serious challenge to PM&E (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). While PM&E, in its transformative guise, aims to challenge and transcend political structures that keep some people marginalized and others powerful, these critiques suggest that PM&E is also a product of, and thus limited, by these same structures. Participatory approaches to development, including PM&E, make at least three inherent assumptions that fail to address politics. Firstly, they assume programme participants are more or less ‘free agents’. In reality, programme participants are constrained by both broader social norms and the structures of development programmes themselves (Holte-McKenzie, Forde, & Theobald, 2006). As Cleaver (2001) has noted, participatory development can impose structures that, although intended as vehicles for community participation, are formalized in such a way that they do not reflect community dynamics and may rather be suited to increasing external control. Secondly, while PM&E tends to assume that programme beneficiaries understand programme objectives at face value, this is often not the case (Noponen, 1997;

Uphoff, 1991). As Mosse (2001) has argued, target beneficiaries of development programmes see these programmes as important sources of patronage, and therefore shape their self-representations and opinions to conform with and confirm what they believe programme implementers want them to say. Thirdly, development discourse has, in the last decade, become too prone to assume that participation is naturally a desirable end in-itself, espousing what Leeuwis (2004) refers to as a doctrine of ‘maximum participation.’ But participation also implies a cost – of effort and time – which not all intended participants may be willing or able to pay. This paper will show how all of these critiques apply within the specific area of participatory monitoring and evaluation. It further reveals that PM&E feeds into local social dynamics, and can particularly exacerbate tensions between literate and illiterate people, ironically creating the potential for exclusion of the latter.

3. An introduction to the NAADS programme

The National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) is a national agricultural extension programme implemented by the Ugandan government. It began operations in six districts in 2001 with the mandate to “increase farmer access to information, knowledge and technology for profitable agricultural production” (NAADS, 2001, pp. 7–8). It receives 85% of its funding from foreign donors, primarily the World Bank and the European Union, 13% from the Ugandan government, and 2% from annual fees levied on participating farmers. These percentages are expected to shift over the course of the programme, as the government and farmers take on more financial responsibility, corresponding to a growing sense of owning and valuing the services the programme provides. According to NAADS’ design principles, it strives to transform Ugandan farmers from engaging in primarily subsistence farming to having a much greater commercial or market orientation. Yet NAADS is also premised on the notion that it should respond to the demands of Ugandan smallholder farmers, both in terms of service, and by giving farmers a role in the coordination and oversight of the programme through the creation and strengthening of member-elected farmer institutions. These institutions are also envisaged to provide a means through which farmers can exert influence over government policy.

Farmers who want to access NAADS’ services enroll in groups. Farmer groups are able to elect representatives to the subcounty farmer forum, to participate in selecting what topics contracted field staff train them on for each season, and to host technology demonstration sites. As of 2006, farmer groups were also able to apply for in-kind technology grants that were to be rotated amongst group members in the form of a revolving loan, under the Integrated Support for Farmer Groups (ISFG). This latter point is especially pertinent in the discussion of PM&E, because PM&E was introduced to many farmer groups at the same time as ISFG, and compliance was widely understood by farmers to be a condition of the loans.

4. Methodology

The descriptive data and resulting analysis offered here is a component of a larger case study on organizational learning and participatory development in the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) programme of Uganda. This research was conducted as part of a PhD and funded through a scholarship provided by Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). As such it was financially independent of the programme it was reviewing.

This research took a process analysis approach (Leeuwis, 2004; Mosse, 1998). It described in detail particular aspects of the NAADS programme as they evolved over time, including participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E), in addition to local procurement

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