Evaluation and Program Planning 35 (2012) 154–160

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Evaluation and Program Planning

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/evalprogplan

Humanitarian action in developing countries: Who evaluates who?

Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos *

CEPED (Centre Population & Développement), UMR 196 Paris Descartes - INED - IRD, 19 rue Jacob, 75006 Paris, France

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 21 October 2010
Accepted 1 November 2010
Available online 10 November 2010

Keywords:
Humanitarian aid
Emergencies
Developing countries
Evaluation
Conflicts of interest

ABSTRACT

Humanitarian NGOs and intergovernmental organisations are usually assessed by their funders, not their beneficiaries. In most cases, their evaluation relies on interviews with "professionals", neglects field surveys, does not use opinion polls and seldom tries to assess the socioeconomic impact of relief. Moreover, it is commissioned by stakeholders at the risk of being judge and party. Such a system brings several conflicts of interest: (1) it needs to be approved by those who are evaluated and so does not deal with "bad eggs" that refuse to be investigated; (2) it produces biased analysis, does not name names and passes over fundamental issues; (3) it is very formal and technocratic, if not meaningless; (4) it does not help to learn from past mistakes. Hence this article proposes a framework to develop third party evaluations. It is suggested that, to be really independent, evaluation should neither be paid or commissioned by stakeholders, i.e. NGOs and institutional funders. To facilitate learning, its methodology and its results must also be available to the general public. To be accepted by those who are evaluated, finally, it should highlight the difficulties, explain the political context, acknowledge its subjectivity, recognize its limits, focus on processes more than results and develop qualitative analysis out of quantitative indicators.

Written from a researcher's point of view, this paper focuses on humanitarian aid abroad and does not aim at answering the ongoing methodological question on "how" to evaluate, but rather on "who" evaluates[1]. In other words, my purpose is not to list the various criteria that can help to measure and balance the positive and negative effects of international assistance in war-torn countries where relief is likely to prolong armed conflicts and harm victims (Anderson, 1999; Pérouse de Montclos, 2001). My objective is only to analyse the way institutional evaluation operates today. Working on and living in developing countries for the last twenty years, I rely on empirical observations and the existing academic literature. As there are no comprehensive data on the biographies of the evaluators of humanitarian aid, available research is a bit disappointing in this regard. Sociologists usually study the "experts" of good governance, highlighting their contradictions and portraying a global jet-set of highly educated people who know and co-opt each other, have direct access to decision makers and regularly meet during international conferences (Arnove, 1982; Guilhot, 2005; Roelofs, 2003). In developing countries, these specialists are alternatively criticized because they advocate a liberal agenda, sustain technocracies, reproduce repetitive prescriptions, and draw "universal" rules for the world according to western standards which are not always adapted to local contexts.

But such analyses do not specifically address the role of the evaluators of international humanitarian aid. Hence the following article attempts to complete the picture in order to broaden the debate on the structural limits of institutional evaluations. In the first two sections, I remind that NGOs and intergovernmental agencies are assessed by their funders, not their beneficiaries. In most cases, their evaluation neglects field surveys, does not use opinion polls, passes over fundamental issues, and seldom tries to investigate the socioeconomic impact of relief. Moreover, it is commissioned by stakeholders at the risk of being judge and party. So I show that this system raises many conflicts of interests that are described in the last three sections. To sum up, (1) it produces biased analysis; (2) reports are not published and do not name names; (3) as a result, they do not help to learn from past mistakes. In conclusion, I make a few recommendations and suggestions to develop third party evaluations.

1. Who is evaluated?

The fact that NGOs and intergovernmental agencies are evaluated by their funders, not their beneficiaries, is not surprising. In general, the non-profit sector develops according to the wishes of its wealthiest donors, much less according to the needs of the poorest segments of the population: hence arts and culture appear to be extremely well funded as compared to the expectations of the masses regarding social assistance (Salamon, 1995). The political

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +33 01 78 94 98 70; fax: +33 01 78 94 98 79.
E-mail address: marc-antoine.perouse-de-montclos@ird.fr.

[1] This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the World Conference of Humanitarian Studies, Groningen, Holland, 4–7 Feb. 2009.

0149-7189/$ – see front matter © 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2010.11.005

economy of humanitarian aid follows the same rule. It also depends on its funders, more than its beneficiaries.[2] A financial analysis shows that it tends to focus on "causes célèbres", neglect forgotten crises and rely on supply more than demand (Keen, 2008, p. 134; Pérouse de Montclos, 2007). As a result, evaluations are centred on logistics and delivery mechanisms (Crombrugghe (de), Dominique & Decker (de), CÈcilia, 2005, p. 13). They rely on interviews with professional funders or operators, instead of investigating the satisfaction of the so-called 'beneficiaries': an analytical framework which explains why some authors can hastily conclude that NGOs effectively reach the poor (Nancy & Yontcheva, 2006).

Such a pattern is even more pronounced in war-torn countries where insecurity makes the access to victims very difficult. Humanitarian workers themselves often claim that opinion polls are not feasible. Some also argue that NGOs activities are not always visible for the people: the better they are managed from an administrative point of view, the less their beneficiaries appreciate them (Stoddard, 1969, p. 177). According to a survey amongst 2566 Ugandans, for instance, satisfaction declined when communities developed and raised their expectations (Barr & Fafchamps, 2004, p. 15ss). In other words, perceptions would be negatively correlated to the performance and the duration of NGOs programmes.

As a matter of fact, many humanitarian workers consider that opinion polls are meaningless because war victims have nothing to be satisfied of. If asked, refugees would simply complain about their conditions of living. Yet specialists know that it is very possible to prepare questionnaires in order to circumvent the problem and get answers about the quality of relief. In any case, is it really relevant for evaluators to ignore the opinion of those who receive aid? Obviously not if we are concerned by accountability and transparency (Wenar, 2006, p. 10). Guidelines and practices changed in this regard. After the African crisis of the Great Lakes in 1994, evaluators hardly interviewed any "beneficiary" of humanitarian aid. But ten years later, they were to survey the victims of the Asian tsunami of 2004, which also affected war-torn regions like Aceh in Indonesia and the Jaffna peninsula in Sri Lanka.

Thus survivors represented 78% of the 5657 interviews conducted by the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition. With various findings and opinions in different countries. According to a survey by UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), 92% of the Indonesians thought that relief NGOs and intergovernmental organisations performed well. Yet in Sri Lanka, only 30% of a panel of 1000 persons considered that humanitarian workers satisfied their needs (Telford, Cosgrave, & Houghton, 2006, p. 50 and 69). Such differences show how complex attitudes and perceptions can be. While 92% of tsunami victims in Indonesia thought that international organisations were efficient and gave them a higher score than their own government (which got 66%, including local authorities), we found that war victims in Burundi had an opposite view and rated state agencies (58%) better than NGOs (53%).[3]

In any case, opinion polls are very possible as long as the regions surveyed remain accessible. For relief workers, the main challenge is to accept that their assistance can provoke negative reactions. According to the survey mentioned above in Uganda, for instance, less than one person out of two was satisfied with humanitarian aid and one out of five (especially women) thought that NGOs employees were first of all interested by their own business. In Burundi, NGOs did not perform better and the poll showed that international assistance was diverted at all levels. In this regard, surveys appear to be very useful to point out the various problems of a humanitarian operation. If they are not fully integrated into evaluation methods, that is also because of the system.

2. Who evaluates?

Hence it is important to know who evaluates international aid. In most cases, NGOs and intergovernmental organisations are investigated by specialists who are paid by their funders and that they sometimes choose. Such a system is seen as normal and legitimate by many practitioners. According to Tony Beck, for instance, evaluations must be required and conducted with and by the institutions that are evaluated (Beck, 2006, p. 14). Ian Smillie and Larry Minear, who both worked for humanitarian organisations, consider this system to be a third-party evaluation, even if the "experts" are commissioned by the stakeholders (Smillie & Minear, 2004, p. 215; see also Lloyd, Calvo, & Laybourn, 2010, p. 11). Incidentally, they also praise NGOs for their accountability to donors, medias and the governments of the countries where they intervene.

Yet we find that most evaluators of international aid do not fulfil the basic standard of the separation of powers in a democracy, especially between the judiciary and the executive. Indeed, they work for and are paid by stakeholders – institutional funders or implementing partners – who are part of the humanitarian industry. This pattern is sometimes an official instruction. Since 1991, for instance, the Belgian aid agency DGCD (*Direction générale de la coopération au développement*) compels NGOs to allocate to self-evaluation 1% of the funds given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Develtere, Fonteneau, & Pollet, 2004). More generally, there are usually many links between humanitarian volunteers, consultants and funders. Evaluators often have an experience in an international NGO and they are supportive of development aid. Established in 1975 by Oxfam and religious organisations, the Ethiopian CRDA (Christian Relief and Development Association) is thus evaluated by INTRAC (International NGO Training and Research Centre), a consultancy service based in Oxford and led by former heads of Oxfam's evaluation units, like Brian Pratt and Janice Giffe (Pratt, 2008).

In France, the F3E (Fonds pour la promotion des études préalables, des études transversales et des évaluations) is a good example in this regard. Created out of the FEE (Fonds pour les études transversales et les évaluations) and the FEP (Fonds pour les études préalables), which merged in 1994, this platform is made up of some fifty NGOs at par with institutional funders, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is in charge of French development cooperation. The interests of the stakeholders obviously conflict, for F3E is both an evaluator and a funder. As described in a Senate report in 2005, its evaluations are initiated by NGOs to get funding. According to the Court of Accounts, which audits public institutions in France, such a peer review is biased and cannot be objective because of "the links between evaluators and operators, on one side, and the fear of being evaluated tomorrow by those you evaluated yesterday, on the other side" [my translation]. As a matter of fact, the F3E evaluations are very formal. "They seldom criticize programmes and only point out small problems of no consequence. There is no feedback and no sanction. Evaluations are not used to prevent problems in similar development programmes" (Charasse, 2005, p. 13).

3. Some conflicts of interest

Being judge and party has many drawbacks (House, 2004). First, it contradicts the values of the humanitarian movement, which

[2] In this article, it is assumed that humanitarian aid encompasses development issues and is not restricted to emergencies. Its political economy has a social impact on the long term in this regard. In Egypt, for instance, the attraction of donor funding led to the creation of unwanted kindergartens in a society where families used to look after their own children (Abdelrahman, 2004, pp. 182–185).

[3] See Pérouse de Montclos (2006). The full results of the poll can be found at: http://www.observatoire-humanitaire.org/etudes_us/burundi.htm.