



Research article

Four challenges in selecting and implementing methods to monitor and evaluate participatory processes: Example from the Rwenzori region, Uganda



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ABSTRACT

Participatory approaches are now increasingly recognized and used as an essential element of policies and programs, especially in regards to natural resource management (NRM). Most practitioners, decision-makers and researchers having adopted participatory approaches also acknowledge the need to monitor and evaluate such approaches in order to audit their effectiveness, support decision-making or improve learning. Many manuals and frameworks exist on how to carry out monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for participatory processes. However, few provide guidelines on the selection and implementation of M&E methods, an aspect which is also often obscure in published studies, at the expense of the transparency, reliability and validity of the study. In this paper, we argue that the selection and implementation of M&E methods are particularly strategic when monitoring and evaluating a participatory process. We demonstrate that evaluators of participatory processes have to tackle a quadruple challenge when selecting and implementing methods: using mixed-methods, both qualitative and quantitative; assessing the participatory process, its outcomes, and its context; taking into account both the theory and participants' views; and being both rigorous and adaptive. The M&E of a participatory planning process in the Rwenzori Region, Uganda, is used as an example to show how these challenges unfold on the ground and how they can be tackled. Based on this example, we conclude by providing tools and strategies that can be used by evaluators to ensure that they make utile, feasible, coherent, transparent and adaptive methodological choices when monitoring and evaluating participatory processes for NRM.

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1. Introduction

Participatory approaches are now increasingly recognized and used as an essential element of policies and programs, especially

related to environmental or natural resource management (NRM) (Dyer et al., 2014; Vacik et al., 2014). Participatory processes for NRM can be defined as the involvement of members of the public in agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy-forming activities of organizations or institutions responsible for NRM (based on Rowe and Frewer, 2004). In the remainder of this paper, the term “participatory processes” refers to participatory processes in the field of NRM. Most practitioners, decision-makers and researchers having adopted participatory processes also acknowledge the need to monitor and evaluate such processes (e.g. Conrad et al., 2011). Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is usually undertaken to audit

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the efficiency and effectiveness of the participatory process, support decisions about the process and learning and documenting experiences (Forss, 2005). Evaluators may be independent judges, participants in a process, evaluation experts or researchers.

M&E of NRM participatory processes pose specific challenges compared to both M&E of “non-participatory” processes and M&E of participatory processes in other fields. For example, participation of a wide range of stakeholders generates a multiplicity of perspectives and objectives in terms of what the M&E should entail, and how and when it should be carried out. In parallel, the complexity of social–ecological systems, which involve diverse actors and sectors, variable stressors, ambiguous cause–effect relationships, and continuous and non-linear changes, preclude the use of traditional approaches to evaluation (Faber and Alkemade, 2011).

Many of the challenges faced by evaluators when monitoring and evaluating participatory processes relate to the selection and implementation of M&E methods. M&E methods are defined here as the techniques or procedures used to obtain and collate raw data on the participatory process. These include, among others, document reviews, interviews, participant observation, questionnaires or modelling. The choice and implementation of methods are particularly strategic when monitoring and evaluating a participatory process. This is for various reasons:

- Methods chosen may impact the results of the study and its quality, validity, and credibility (Patton, 1999);
- There are no agreed-upon evaluation methods (Rosener, 1981) as evaluation of a participatory process is very context specific and therefore methods have to be context-sensitive (Blackstock et al., 2007); and
- M&E methods reflect the values and norms within the evaluation practice, they are the direct mirror of whether the evaluation is ethical (Laitinen, 2005).

It is therefore essential for evaluators to make informed choice when selecting and implementing M&E methods.

Many manuals exist on how to carry out M&E (Fitz-Gibbon and Lyons Morris, 1987; IDRC, 1997; The World Bank, 2004; UNDP, 2009). Many frameworks also exist to guide the M&E of participatory processes in general (Abelson et al., 2003; Rosener, 1981; Rowe and Frewer, 2000) and related to NRM specifically (Bellamy et al., 2001; Dyer et al., 2014; Webler, 1995; Beierle and Konisky, 2000; Hassenforder et al., 2015c). This literature is useful in terms of providing lists of variables to assess the effectiveness of participatory processes and guidelines on the various steps to follow. However, these manuals and frameworks are not helpful when it comes to choosing between M&E methods and implementing them (Forss, 2005; Annex 4.A1). As a result, many studies on participatory processes do not make the M&E methods used transparent (Frewer and Rowe, 2005) at the expense of the transparency, reliability and validity of the study.

The aim of our paper is to identify challenges that evaluators have to tackle when selecting and implementing methods to monitor and evaluate participatory processes (section two) and to provide tools and strategies to address these challenges (section four). The M&E of a participatory planning process in the Rwenzori Region, Uganda, is used as an example to show how these challenges unfold on the ground and how they can be tackled (section three).

2. A quadruple challenge for M&E methods

Four main debates relate to the M&E of participatory processes. They pose a quadruple challenge to the selection and

implementation of M&E methods. These debates are between: 1/ qualitative and quantitative methods, 2/ process and outcome-oriented M&E, 3/ theory-based and participant-based M&E and 4/ static and adaptive M&E. By selecting and implementing M&E methods, practitioners, decision-makers and researchers take a position among these debates. This position can impact the consideration given to the M&E results by the different stakeholders. Evaluators need to be aware of these debates and make their position transparent.

2.1. Qualitative and quantitative M&E methods

When selecting M&E methods, practitioners can choose among a range of possible methods. These methods are often categorized in two clusters: methods which are more quantitative in nature such as surveys or questionnaires and methods which are more qualitative in nature such as interviews or participant observation. A plethora of manuals or books exist which explain in detail how to implement qualitative or quantitative methods (e.g. Hennink et al., 2010; Mack et al., 2005; Maxim, 1999; Taylor, 2005). Even though some authors, like Blackstock et al. (2007) or Forss (2005, p. 54) underline that “there is a trend towards qualitative methods as evaluation tasks become more complex”, other authors suggest that the distinction between the two “seems of limited relevance, as the qualitative and quantitative nature of data tends to merge in the course of a practical evaluation” (De Vaus, 2001 in Forss, 2005, p. 59). Other authors still, suggest to build on this distinction and to use both qualitative and quantitative methods. This “methodological pluralism” is advocated, among others, by authors in mixed-methods research (e.g. Brannen, 1992; Brewer and Hunter, 1989; Creswell, 2003; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009), public participation evaluation (e.g. Bamberger, 1990; Chess, 2000; Cook, 1997) and systems thinking (e.g. Cabrera et al., 2008). Rationale for this “methodological pluralism” is that multiple methods and triangulation of observation can contribute to methodological rigor in evaluation (Patton, 1987). It is especially relevant when neither qualitative nor quantitative methods alone are sufficient to monitor and evaluate the object under consideration (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009), as is the case for participatory processes. Based on these considerations, we too, suggest to use mixed-methods when evaluating participatory processes. Creswell (2009) highlights that methodological challenges in using mixed-methods, particularly in interventions and action research, has only started being addressed recently. Methodological challenges identified so far include, among others, validity aspects, ethical issues, prevalence of one type of method over the other and timing of integration (qualitative before quantitative, vice-versa or simultaneity) (Creswell, 2009; Greene et al., 2001). Our study aims to contribute to this endeavour.

2.2. Process and outcome-oriented M&E

A second dichotomy is between monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of a participatory process and the process itself (Chess and Purcell, 1999; Rowe and Frewer, 2000). The former focuses on monitoring and evaluating the results in order to determine whether the participatory means are successful. Results include, for example, better accepted decisions, consensus or education depending on the targeted objectives of the participatory process. The latter emphasizes the importance of the means – rather than the results – and looks at aspects such as fairness, information exchange, group process, and procedures (Chess and Purcell, 1999). While some authors advocate for the assessment of outcomes when monitoring and evaluating a participatory process (Beierle, 1999; Frewer and Rowe, 2005), many recognize that the process,

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