

how to measure the impact of poverty alleviation: in search of new methods in evaluation

Henri Jorritsma of the IOB Policy and Operations Evaluation Department reviews some methodological challenges

Today everything is costing. Parents have to pay levy and school fees and if you cannot pay school fees you sell a goat. But in this land we depend on crops and if the crops fail we sell a goat... We have been building schools for nothing. Children are standing outside, teachers are not teaching, they only look after their salaries. People's education has gone down. What is development?

An anonymous informant from Mbulu District, Tanzania.

The **Millennium Development Goals** call for reducing the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day to half the 1990 level by 2015. The Goals also call for halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger between 1990 and 2015. Achieving these Goals by 2015 will require more focus on development impact in order to effectively measure national progress. The Goals establish yardsticks for measuring results, not just for developing countries but for the rich countries that help to fund development programmes and for the multilateral institutions that help countries implement them. It must not be forgotten, however, that poverty reduction or development is not the sum total of the individual Goals. There is a general understanding that poverty is a complex multidimensional concept and that poverty reduction strategies should be based on a thorough analysis of its root causes. In other words, progress on such Goals as basic education or primary health care can, of course, be evaluated, but that does not automatically give much insight into the improvements of the poverty situation as such.

An April 2004 **study on decentralisation**, commissioned by the **OECD/DAC Network on Aid Evaluation**, pointed towards the weak poverty focus of many donor programmes, despite the rhetoric of the Millennium Development Goals. It found little evidence that donor interventions contributed significantly towards poverty reduction, and identified lack of commitment on the part of governments of recipient countries. Against this background, individuals and institutions concerned with evaluation are trying to develop a new focus on impact instead of performance evaluation of projects and programmes.

Poverty and evaluation

The **IOB Policy and Operations Evaluation Department** is a unit in the **Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs** established in 1977. It is independent in terms of programming, terms of reference, evaluation designs and methods, and reports

directly to the **Dutch Parliament**. IOB's overall objective is to meet the need for independent evaluation in all fields of foreign policy. Specifically, the aim is to fit the results of the evaluations into the knowledge cycle of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The reports of the evaluations are used as feedback to improve both policies and their implementation. With the results of previous exercises at their disposal, policymakers can prepare new interventions more purposefully and more effectively.

Since the early 1970s, the reduction of poverty has been the major objective of Dutch development cooperation policy. Improving the living conditions of poor groups has chiefly been addressed through projects, either through improvements in community services such as education, health care and drinking water supply, or through support for activities that generate income. In evaluating these projects, the emphasis was usually placed on the degree to which the project goals had been achieved and the efficiency of implementation. Generally, evaluations started with an analysis of government policy and goals of projects and programmes, rather than with an analysis of the poverty problem in the field. Evaluations also paid far less attention to processes that led to this situation and the underlying causes of poverty; the perception of the population regarding the poverty situation, its underlying causes and the relevance of aid activities; and the extent to which aid activities aimed at removing the causes of poverty as perceived by the population.

In addition, programme development goals are generally defined in sectoral or thematic terms. As a consequence, evaluations apply logframes measuring outputs and outcomes in sectoral or thematic terms. Observations on poverty impact seldom go beyond the level of impressionistic description. In most evaluations, target group perceptions on poverty are used in an illustrative manner. Field observations focus on project or programme execution, measuring efficiency and effectiveness. Due to time constraints, discussions with target groups remain largely anecdotal.

Given that reduction of poverty is the principal objective of Dutch development cooperation, the degree to which development activities contribute towards that objective is the most crucial question facing evaluations. IOB is thus currently faced with three methodological challenges. Firstly, how to go beyond the outcome level in evaluation and measure the impact on poverty level? Outcome level in IOB evaluations relate to project/programme goals, while impact assessment refers to overall development goals and, ultimately, socio-economic development. The second major methodological dilemma is how to find out what is going on at the grassroots. It is perfectly possible to analyse the quality of national policies and find out to what extent they are pro-poor, so to speak. It is also quite feasible to analyse the donor interventions on that level. However, that does not say much about what is going on at the grassroots level. Changes in the poverty situation of local poor people are not easily attributed to policy changes at the macro-level. There is a whole series of known or unknown

interfering factors that have to be identified (and isolated) before it is possible to formulate plausible linkages between the micro- and macro-level. The third challenge is how to systematically integrate target group perceptions in evaluation.

IOB experience so far

Recent evaluation of two **District Rural Development Programmes (DRDPs) in Mbulu and Songea Districts of Tanzania** took target group perceptions of poverty as an entry point. New methods and techniques were adopted in confronting perceptions, trends and policy in the two districts. The approach chosen focused on the way in which the people perceive their own poverty situation (for which the activities are intended), as well as long-term social and economic trends. In Mbulu, a video registration was made of the people's perceptions, but due to the costs involved this was not feasible in Songea. In both districts, the people's views were recorded by a research team from the University of Dar es Salaam.

The evaluation concluded that that the two DRDPs have not yet achieved their main long-term objective, structural poverty alleviation, nor their short-term objective of strengthening local governance. It argued that if the DRDPs continue in the present way, their contribution to poverty reduction will be negligible, also in future. Despite the development of new methods and techniques for this evaluation, problems remained: inconsistencies in data collection; no systematic match between perceptions and "hard" statistical data; and little attention to micro-macro linkages.

Earlier experiments in country evaluations (**Mali, Bolivia** and Egypt), evaluation of **Women and development** and evaluation of **SNV** identified similar shortcomings in terms of their poverty focus: they were anecdotal and impressionistic; representativeness was questionable; and gathering group perceptions was time consuming.

Can we learn from other experiences?

Poverty impact studies by the **Operations Evaluations Department** of the **World Bank** and the **British Department for International Development** face the same methodological challenges: attempts to gather the perceptions of the target group are impressionistic and provide few concrete data. Perception studies exist but are unrelated to project interventions. In **Voices of the poor**, the World Bank collected the voices of more than 60,000 poor women and men from 60 countries, in an unprecedented effort to understand poverty from the perspective of the poor themselves. In his book *Whose reality counts: putting the first last*, Robert Chambers argues that central issues in development have been overlooked, and that many past errors have flowed from domination by those with power. Development professionals need new approaches and methods for interacting, learning and knowing. Through analysing experience of past

mistakes and myths, and of the continuing methodological revolution of participatory rural appraisal (PRA), Chambers points towards solutions, arguing that personal, professional and institutional change is essential if the poor are to receive greater recognition. Changing the face of evaluations should make it easier to reach these objectives.

In search of new approaches

IOB is currently undertaking an evaluation of the **sector wide approach (SWAP)**, assessing changes in Dutch policy and in the poverty orientation in policies of recipient countries. It will consider how eligible countries were selected. How were aid sectors in the country selected? Did SWAPs actually get off the ground? Did SWAPs enhance the focus on poverty alleviation of recipient governments in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs)?

Complementary evaluation of poverty impact in selected countries (Burkina Faso, Zambia, Bangladesh, and Bolivia), currently in a preparatory phase, will be looking systematically into target group perceptions. At the same time, it will try to link changes in the poverty situation with changes in the development architecture through the introduction of SWAPs. Literature and document research on the selected countries, focusing on overall development trends (economic, social, institutional, governance) and taking a timeframe of 20 years, will provide the background. Fieldwork will be undertaken in two selected regions in the countries where Dutch-financed interventions took place, focusing on 'groundtruthing' the information gathered during the desk study, and exposing findings to target group perceptions. These evaluation findings will be linked to the question of attribution. Finally, there will be country-specific reports plus a synthesis for the four countries.

For the planned evaluation of poverty impact in selected countries, IOB is currently preparing a workshop which will discuss the methodological challenges highlighted here. The workshop will need to consider how the concept of poverty should be dealt with. Should poverty be defined in a holistic way, narrowed down to target group perceptions or predefined and/or restricted by the evaluator? What methods should be applied for perception studies: PRA, the **Method for Impact Assessment of Poverty Alleviation Projects (MAPP)**, life history, transect, or something else? How do we measure impact of interventions on poverty without sufficient baseline data? Can this be done with **counterfactual analysis** or before-after comparison? Only when these challenges have been addressed will this and other evaluations be able to go beyond the outcome level and measure the impact on poverty.

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