Promoting child-centred community development through participatory evaluation

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Introduction

This paper reflects on issues related to participatory evaluation in the context of child-centred community development (see Box 1). It raises a number of questions that community development agencies need to consider in seeking to implement participatory programmes:

- At what stage should the facilitating agency, community participants and other stakeholders get involved in the evaluation?
- How can participatory evaluations enhance choices for children?
- What considerations should guide the evaluation?
- And how can boys and girls in different age groups be prepared to become effective partners in this process?

In sharing reflections related to these questions, this article draws upon the author's experience as technical manager for PLAN International for five and a half years. The focus of the work was mainstreaming the participation of boys and girls in different age groups into development processes.

Evaluation involves the assessment of the overall design of a programme: its methods, technology, resources, human relationships, relationships with institutions, and physical and qualitative results. Traditionally, evaluation has been seen as a compliance exercise that is taken up at the end of a programme, mainly to measure output and the effective utilisation of funds. Project participants and other stakeholders in the community have little to say in terms of the design of the evaluation or the use of results. The introduction of the principle of "community ownership" in the last decade has brought a fundamental shift that requires that all stakeholders have opportunities to participate in all stages of programming, including evaluation. The inclusion of boys and girls adds another dimension. Adopting this participatory approach to community development, however, raises several challenges.

> **Box 1 What is child-centred community development?**
> To make child and youth participation meaningful to young people themselves and to their communities, child centredness places an emphasis on:
> - Enhancing adult awareness and sensitivity about children's rights, needs, priorities and potential, as differentiated by age and gender.
> - Facilitating opportunities for children and youth to participate with their families and communities in decisions that affect their lives, consistent with their age and ability.
> - Equipping boys and girls with skills and competencies to enable them to participate effectively.

Basic considerations to guide evaluation

Participatory monitoring and evaluation is not a simple shift from analysing the effects of a programme from a donor's perspective to taking the perspective of the community

In addition to measuring results, it should be an empowering experience that leads a community to feel greater ownership and commitment to the project. When it is part of a child-centred approach, it should enhance choices for children by measuring results in terms of long-term objectives set by the community, based on their own vision for their children. This vision should include the priorities of boys and girls in different age groups. Towards this end, it is fundamentally important for children and other stakeholders to understand participatory processes and issues.

While there are no prescribed ways to divide groups by age and gender, usually three or four groups are formed for boys and girls from 6 to 18 years of age. These groups vary depending on the issue and local cultural practices. For example, where adolescent boys and girls are segregated, separate groups are most effective. While all age groups can participate in a project to protect the natural environment, advocacy aspects may be best taken up by adolescent boys and girls, due to their practical involvement in daily life and ability to grasp and articulate the issues.

Participatory evaluation should not be seen as merely a process of monitoring outcomes against preset goals, but also as a process that allows the incorporation of learning and subsequent programme adjustments

Programme monitoring by different stakeholders provides critical input, but different groups monitor the same processes with different objectives, using different indicators: adults and children in the community, field staff of the facilitating agency, staff at the programme unit level, partner organisations, local authorities, and the rest of the community. The focus of community monitoring is on day-to-day progress and changes in practices and attitudes. The focus of staff is on the quality of support, the efficient use of resources, and accountability. The programme unit monitors how well the chosen strategy achieves results. For participatory evaluation to be effective, all participants need to share the results and be kept informed about subsequent adjustments that are made in terms of processes and resource allocation.

Community ownership of an evaluation does not exclude the participation of other key actors but it does change the way that external agents orient themselves to the community, share expectations, and conduct their part of the evaluation

In child-centred community development, several key actors come together, sometimes with competing interests. Some of these stakeholders are key to the success of the process, and others add value in different measures. Despite these differences, all of them need to

be involved in the evaluation in order to gain multiple perspectives and to enhance collaborative action. Prepare for effective partnerships

In order to make evaluation an empowering experience for those who are directly connected with the project, as well as a learning experience for other stakeholders, the following steps need to be taken:

- Before the evaluation begins, share baseline information, process records, and relevant studies and reports by the facilitating agency, other agencies or government.

- Examine indicators in relation to objectives. Do all stakeholders view the indicators from the same perspective? Do the indicators of external groups differ from those set by children and adults in the community? The interests of different stakeholders need to be discussed and understood by all sides.

- Design specific mechanisms for sharing results with boys, girls, community adults and other partners so that adjustments can be made to the programme in the future.

- Plan for continuous education. A series of occasions need to be planned that will help community adults, boys and girls reflect on project processes, their roles, benefits to the community, and indicators that will most effectively measure results. By setting up terms of reference for the evaluation through negotiations with other stakeholders, the community will have opportunities to establish their own programme requirements.

Don't leave evaluation to the end

Contrary to the belief that evaluation is to be designed at the end of the programme, a child-centred approach requires that thinking about the evaluation should begin during the planning stage

Community development plans emerge out of the discussion and analysis of priorities by adults and by boys

Box 4 Engaging all partners

In El Salvador, a "school for parents" was created to increase interaction between adolescents and their families, with a view to reducing youth violence. Based on a yearly evaluation, the programme was considered a success. The evaluation indicated that the planned number of sessions was completed and that parents attended all sessions. The youth, however, dropped out in large numbers. Though some parents expressed happiness over improved relationships, the evaluation did not include any measure of actual changed attitudes and practices by parents and youth. Interviews with youth revealed that, from their perspective, the topics addressed were not relevant or interactive enough. Sensitive issues such as abuse at home, the sexual abuse of girls, and parents' quarrels had not been discussed. Based on this feedback from youth, the programme was redesigned in its third year. Youth identified topics for discussion and convinced adults of their importance. They decided on the roles of parents, youth and the facilitating agency, what they would like to achieve, and how they would measure progress and make suitable adjustments as required. The parent education component focused on child rights, including the right to participation in decision making. More youth information and a counselling programme were added. This comprehensive approach increased programme acceptance among parents as well as youth and improved overall programme effectiveness.

Box 5 The risk of unintended consequences

Participatory evaluation is useful in bringing out unintended as well as intended consequences for boys and girls and their families, as the following example shows.

A watershed development project implemented in the Tamil Nadu province of India is a success in many respects. It increases small farmers' negotiating capacities and enhances families' economic security and health by increasing the availability of water for drinking, for animals, and for producing fruit, fodder, fuel and leaves. During project planning, it was assumed that this general economic well-being would result in improved life quality for boys and girls in all age groups, which would be automatically reflected in increased education and other opportunities for children. Participatory evaluation, however, indicated an unintended negative effect: more children dropping out of school. Given the increased profitableness of farm work, a number of families chose to add to the family income by sending their children off to do farm labour rather than sending them to school.

In the same region, an evaluation of self-help credit groups showed economic success as well as greater self-esteem among the mothers who were involved. Their children were proud of their mothers' achievement and considered them role models. An unintended negative effect, however, was an increased workload for adolescent girls who took care of the household and looked after siblings when their mothers went to meetings.

As a result of these discoveries, programme adjustments were made, such as increasing the availability of home-and centre-based early childcare, awareness education for parents, and increased interactions between school management committees and parents.

and girls in different age groups. To begin, these groups identify issues and broad programmes that can address them. Different components of a programme are then broken down into a series of projects that will progressively address the issue over a period of time. For example, to achieve the overall goal of reducing the school drop out rate in a community, project components might include improving school facilities, improving the curriculum, training teachers to use creative and child-friendly methods, developing creative teaching materials, increasing parent awareness about the importance of education, initiating adult literacy classes, and involving parents and children in school management committees. The objectives of these projects reflect stakeholders' visions for improving children's quality of life over the long term. Therefore, from the beginning, as each programme component is being designed, different stakeholders need to work together to define the indicators that will help them measure its success. It is therefore also logical that the ownership of evaluation results needs to remain with the community so that they can make suitable adjustments to the programme in the future.

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