SEARCHING FOR IMPACT AND METHODS. NGO EVALUATION SYNTHESIS STUDY

Report
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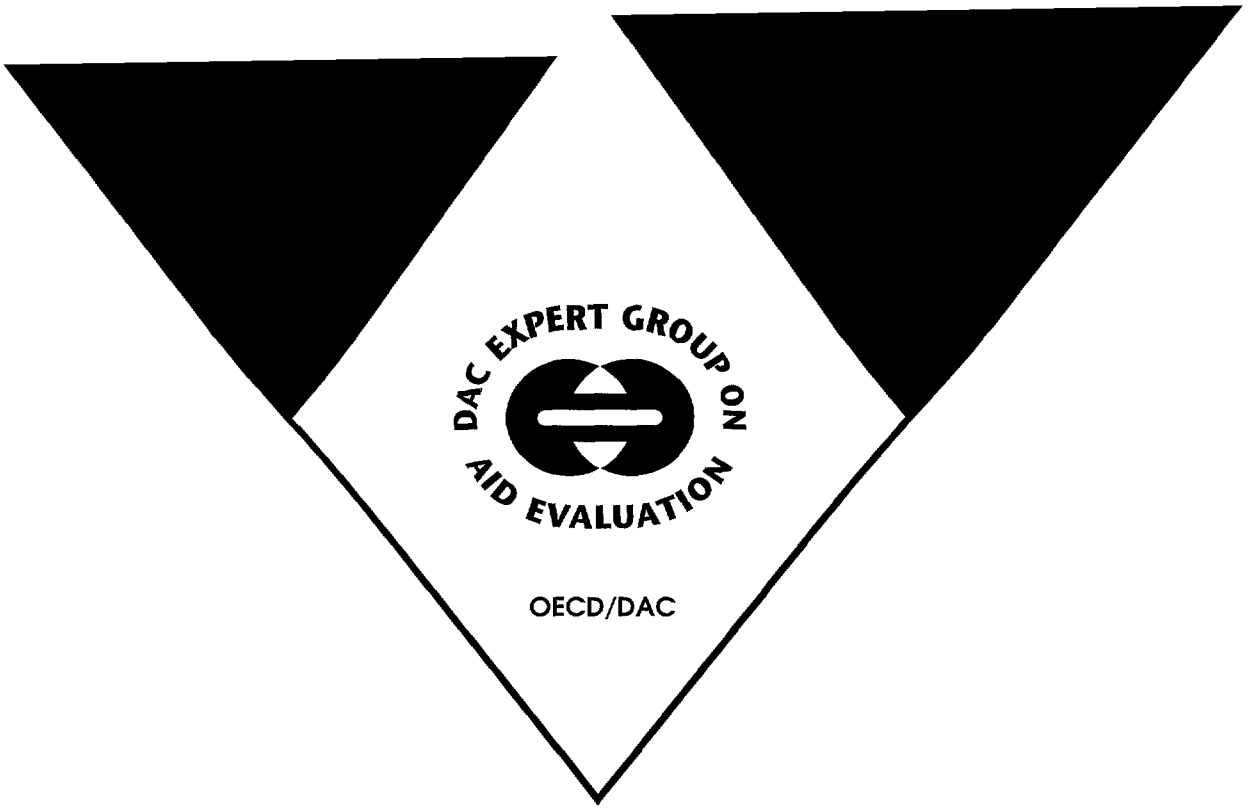

REPORT OF EVALUATION STUDY

Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

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SEARCHING FOR IMPACT AND METHODS
NGO EVALUATION SYNTHESIS STUDY

A Report prepared for the OECD/DAC
Expert Group on Evaluation

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APPENDICES
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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the initiative of the Head of Evaluation and Internal Audit in the Department of International Development Cooperation of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Finland and following agreement at the OECD/DAC Expert Group on Aid Evaluation meeting in October 1996, a team of five people from four European Institutes began work on this Study These were the Groupe de Recherche et d Echanges Technologiques (GRET) Paris France (Mr Jean Louis Vielajus), the Diakonhjemmets Internasjonale Senter (DIS) Oslo, Norway (Dr Stein Erik Kruse) the Institute of Development Studies, University of Helsinki Finland (Mr Timo Kyllonen and Ms Satu Ojanpera), and the Overseas Development Institute, London England (Mr Roger C Riddell)

In brief the twofold purpose of the Study was to gather and synthesise NGO evaluations of development projects and programmes in order first to present data and information on the impact of NGO development interventions and secondly, to review evaluation methods used The draft final Report, prepared for the OECD/DAC Export Group on evaluation, was completed in early April 1997 Following the Report s dissemination and a series of meetings to obtain feedback on the findings and conclusions, the Report was finalised in December

As is explained in some detail in *The Main Report*, and as initially highlighted in the Study s *Inception Report* produced in December 1996 it became increasingly clear not only that the task set was a mammoth one but that it would not be possible to undertake a systematic and comprehensive analysis in the time available Thus while the overall project represents a unique attempt to address these issues on an international basis and notwithstanding the length of this Report and the wealth of data and information contained (especially in the 13 case study appendices) the authors would like to emphasise that this Report presents an initial view of the vast, and fast-growing, NGO literature on impact and methods Relatedly, *The Main Report* provides only a summary of the country case study material for those who wish to have further information on what is happening in particular countries and who are looking for examples of the different ways in which NGOs are approaching evaluation it is recommended that they read the accompanying volume

In undertaking our work across four continents, we have been assisted by a range of institutions and scores of individuals who have given generously of their time and have been willing to share a range of documents many of which are not in the public domain While it is not possible to express our appreciation to each and every one individually, we would like to mention a number of people for their assistance Our first thanks goes to Dr Ulla Vuorela and her team from the Finnish Cooperative Centre whose preparatory work in gathering reports and related data was invaluable to us without this source of data, it would have been simply impossible to undertake the study commissioned to us

Secondly we would like to thank Mr Kari Karanko and his staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland Helsinki whose support and encouragement ensured that the project was both started and completed For financial support and encouragement we would like to thank the Governments of Denmark Finland France Germany Netherlands Norway and Sweden without whom it would not have been possible to undertake the range of case studies contained herein Equally our thanks are due to Mr Hartmut Schneider and Mr Hans Lundgren at the OECD/DAC and to senior officials in the evaluation departments of most OECD donor agencies for providing us with reports and in many cases, for facilitating contact with a range of key individuals and NGOs in their respective countries

Thirdly we wish to thank the many NGOs and NGO staff in both the north and the south who not only provided us with their evaluation reports and reviews and explained their attitudes and

approaches to evaluation but also encouraged us in our work While this Report has been written for the OECD/DAC Evaluation Group, we hope that it will be circulated widely across the different NGO networks and communities

Fourthly, we would like to express particular thanks to our three collaborators who joined us to undertake two of the 13 case studies These are Anthony Bebbington and Denise Humphreys who researched and wrote up the Chilean case study, and David Mansfield, who researched and wrote up the United States' case study They worked under extreme pressure to produce some of the most interesting analysis in the Study, and early feedback suggests that their work has already been appreciated

Fifthly, we would like to thank the scores of NGOs who read and provided comments on the draft final" Report and whose comments, ideas and suggestions are summarised in the final chapter of this Report

Finally we would like to thank key support staff at the Institute of Development Studies in Helsinki and the Overseas Development Institute in London Particular thanks go to Leena Saavalainen Ellen Mustonen and Eva Marita Rinne at the IDS and to Sandra Cox and Matty Thwaites at the ODI for the time and effort they put in to editorial work and ensuring that this Report was produced on time

In undertaking the work for this Study it has become clear not merely that there is considerable interest in the issues raised, but that the whole area of impact evaluation is changing fast We hope that the Report will contribute to ongoing discussion and debate about impact and evaluation methods

Roger C Riddell
Stein Erik Kruse
Timo Kyllonen
Satu Ojanpera
Jean Louis Vielajus

November 1997

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

AIMS	Assessing the Impact of Microenterprise Services
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CDIE	Centre for Development Information and Evaluation
CEM	Centro de Estudias de la Mujer (Centre for Women s Studies)
CHW	Community Health Worker
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CIDE	Centro de Investigacion y Desarrollo de la Educacion (Centre for Education Research and Development)
CONGAD	Conseil des ONG d'appui au developpement
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DAI	Development Alternatives Incorporated
DANIDA	Danish International Development Agency
DCA	DanChurchAid
DFID	Department for International Development
DIS	Diakonhjemmets Internasjonale Senter
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
FVS	Finnish Volunteer Service
GAO	General Audit Office
GOM	Gemeenschappelijk Overleg Medefinanciering
GRET	Groupe de recherche et d echanges technologiques
HPD	Health and Population Division
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IEC	Information, Education and Communication
IEP	Instituto de Ecologia Politica (Institute for Political Ecology)
INDAP	Instituto para el Desarrollo Agropecuario (Agricultural Development Institute)
KEPA	The Service Centre for Development Cooperation (Finland)
K-REP	Kenya Rural Enterprise Programme
MBP	Microenterprise Best Practice
MIP	Microenterprise Innovation Project
NCA	Norwegian Church Aid
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
ODA	Overseas Development Administration
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OPVC	Office of Private Voluntary Cooperation
ORT	Oral Rehydration Therapy
PME	Project appraisal Monitoring and Evaluation
PVO	Private Voluntary Organisation
REDESOL	Red de Instituciones de Solidaridad (microenterprise NGO network)
REMAPP	NGO Group on Research and Evaluation (UK)
SEEP	Small Enterprise Educational and Promotional Network
Sida	Swedish International Development Authority
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SODECAM	Sociedad para el Desarrollo del Campesino Mapuche (Society for the Development of the Mapuche Peasant)
TOR	Terms of Reference
UK	United Kingdom
UK/I	United Kingdom and Ireland
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Study's purpose and an overview of the content of this Report

This Study was commissioned by the OECD/DAC Expert Group on Aid Evaluation Its primary purpose was to undertake a synthesis study of the impact of Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) development projects derived largely from evaluation reports as well as the methods used in assessing impact The information was gathered from evaluation reports commissioned by donors and from data and information gathered (through reports and interviews) in 13 case studies undertaken in both donor and southern countries The primary focus of the Study was on the impact of discrete development interventions in poor countries some attempt was made to include projects focusing on capacity-building and linked initiatives but the database of such projects is still very small

The overall Study comprises two volumes this *The Main Report* and *The Appendices* which contain the case studies *The Main Report* includes an extended bibliography Following the Introduction (Part A) *The Main Report* is divided into three parts Part B focuses on the impact evidence beginning with a discussion of data quality (Chapter 2) This is followed by a review of the accumulated evidence obtained from reviewing 60 separate reports of 240 projects undertaken in 26 developing countries based on donor-commissioned evaluation reports (Chapter 3) Using this as a template Chapter 4 summarises (from *The Appendices*) the information on impact from the 13 case studies and Chapter 5 impact data from a narrow cluster of thematic and sectoral studies Part C focuses on methods Chapter 7 summarises the main methodological approaches used in the majority of the ten donor commissioned studies and Chapter 8 provides an overview of the differences in approach and method found in the evaluation and linked studies undertaken by NGOs and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) (Particular examples and more detailed descriptions of approaches used by different NGOs are to be found in *The Appendices*) Finally Part D contains the Study s main recommendations (Chapter 9) and a summary of the comments and initial reactions to the draft final report produced in May 1997 (Chapter 10)

A first overarching conclusion – confirmed by data and interviews in *all* the different case study countries – is that in spite of growing interest in evaluation there is still a lack of reliable evidence on the impact of NGO development projects and programmes There are three reasons for this most impact assessments have had to rely on qualitative data and judgements as a result of inadequate or non-existent monitoring and base-line data most impact evaluations have been undertaken very rapidly and most evaluations have focused on recording project outputs and not

outcomes or broader impact Yet secondly and in spite of this initial reaction to the Study has been broad agreement with the analysis and conclusions drawn even from (donor) countries not included in the studies synthesised

The donor-commissioned studies

With the exception of the United States donor-commissioned studies on the impact of NGO development interventions are comparatively new The criteria against which impact has been judged in the recent 1990s studies have been influenced by the following factors the orientation of the first USAID-commissioned studies contemporary views on issues considered important to development the apparent strengths and comparative advantages of NGOs in development and the wider debates about impact evaluation Thus most of the recent donor commissioned studies have assessed impact against the following criteria

> the achievement of objectives impact in terms of poverty reach alleviation of poverty and the degree of participation sustainability (financial and institutional) cost-effectiveness innovation and flexibility replicability and scaling-up gender impact environmental impact and impact in terms of advancing democracy and pluralism and strengthening civil society

Though most donor-commissioned studies have listed the criteria against which they have assessed impact none has provided detailed information on precisely how these have been assessed and judged though the absence of much quantitative and historic data meant that wide use had to be made of qualitative judgements Most evaluations involved project visits though these varied in length from a few hours to a number of weeks almost all involved reading project documentation and talking to the implementing agency in most (but not all) cases efforts were made to talk to beneficiaries In some cases rapid rural and participatory appraisal techniques were used The Canadian and Australian studies used (slightly different) verification approaches comparing the impact assessments of external evaluators with those made by the NGOs themselves with varying results

The following paragraphs summarise some of the main conclusions on impact from the synthesis of these studies The main text provides important nuances and qualifications to these sweeping generalisations

The achievement of objectives In broad terms the donor studies provided a positive picture of the projects and programmes achieving their stated objectives – 90% or more of projects had achieved their immediate objectives However some studies argued that it was often not easy to assess project performance against objectives

Impact livelihoods and poverty Impact on the lives of the poor varied considerably ranging from significant benefits to little evidence of making much

difference However all agree that even the best projects are insufficient to enable the beneficiaries to escape from poverty Most NGO projects do reach the poor (but often not the poorest) though analysis of the socio-economic status of the target group and others appears to be rare most NGOs not only small ones appear not to work with any theory or analysis of poverty Important sectoral differences were noted NGOs often seem to perform better in more traditional social sector interventions and perform worse when moving into more technical interventions especially without the necessary skills Additionally there appears to be far more information in the sectoral/thematic studies with which to draw conclusions about impact Much evidence points to major improvements in living standards and health status as a result of NGO projects

Sustainability Most studies focus on financial sustainability more recent ones also examine projects in relation to institutional sustainability and a minority look at environmental sustainability Most projects examined were not financially sustainable and future prospects for many were poor in most cases the poorer the beneficiaries the less likely a project is to be financially sustainable However some sub-sectoral differences were found

Cost-effectiveness On the one hand most studies cited inadequate data with which to form firm judgements on cost-effectiveness but on the other a number of studies argued that in most projects the benefits exceeded the costs outlaid Some crude comparisons with official aid projects are made broadly favourable to NGO interventions in spite of NGOs often underestimating total project costs

Innovation and flexibility Some studies praised NGOs for their innovativeness others argued that there is little unique in their activities Where innovations do occur (and a number are reported) they often appear to be linked to close interaction with the beneficiaries and are frequently based on long-term and detailed research

Other factors Evidence on replicability and scaling-up was sketchy largely because the evaluations focused on discrete time-bound projects There were wide differences in the studies' assessment of the impact on women and there was often a large gap between expectations and achievements Most projects tended to reinforce traditional roles though there were clear and impressive exceptions Environmental assessments of projects by NGOs are still relatively rare While some studies indicated that environmental impact is often small not justifying costly assessments some have negative impacts of which many NGOs remain unaware The studies provided little hard data in terms of advancing democracy and strengthening civil society

What contributes to success and failure? Although most studies did not assess the relative importance of different factors a number made reference to specific influences on project performance The two most frequently-cited influences were external links particularly relationships between the project and the wider environment and competent staff to implement projects A third factor was the

sensitivity of the project in responding to local needs and (different forms of) beneficiary participation Other factors noted included the following a clear overall vision competent planning and design skills adequate financial managerial and administrative skills sufficient funds and knowledge or an ability to access knowledge about similar interventions undertaken by other NGOs or development agencies

Impact evaluations undertaken by NGOs the case study evidence

The Study did not purport to produce a comprehensive synthesis of impact evaluations undertaken by NGOs Instead it provided one building block of such a synthesis by bringing together the evidence gathered from 13 case studies to be found in *The Appendices* The *Main Report* summarises this evidence Even in these countries impact evaluations undertaken by NGOs are not easy to access for three reasons because NGOs (outside the United States) have traditionally not undertaken impact evaluations or placed them in the public domain because many NGO evaluations have addressed particular and far more narrow problems and because most NGO evaluations have been undertaken more as a learning tool than as a mechanism to provide objective information to external audiences Two other important differences between donor-commissioned and NGO evaluations are noted first NGOs usually attach major importance to beneficiary participation and to accountability downwards" and secondly they appear to attach greater importance to the wider context within which evaluation is placed though the Study also notes some marked differences between rhetoric and reality

The Study notes that there is growing evidence not merely of NGOs undertaking impact assessments but of NGOs in many (though not all) countries themselves utilising an increasing number of criteria used in donor-commissioned studies with which to judge performance relevance achievement of objectives efficiency and effectiveness and sustainability are terms in increasingly common usage Overall there appears to be growing and now quite widespread support for evaluation among NGOs – a marked change over the past 10 years – though most of the problems identified above in assessing impact discussed in the donor-commissioned studies apply to NGO efforts

However in some countries (such as the United Kingdom) while there is more support for undertaking evaluation there are concerns about focusing exclusively on *impact* evaluations – for fear that if donors begin to fund NGOs on the basis of impact this will have a detrimental effect on reaching the poor on their innovative and experimental work and on strengthening those attributes which differentiate them from other (non-NGO) development actors Likewise there is an important difference between larger NGOs (many of whom are now undertaking regular evaluations) and smaller NGOs (many of whom are not) The latter are often uneasy about or even hostile to using what are seen as inappropriate and expensive tools and methods with which to assess their work

Examples of NGO methods *The Appendices* provide a range of examples of different methods and approaches to evaluation used by NGOs which are summarised in *The Main Report* The examples given extend far wider than an exclusive focus on impact They include the following different approaches to participatory evaluation approaches to performance measurement (used especially in the United States) examples of experimenting with different indicators for both general NGO evaluations and for sectorally-specific interventions methods of assessing capacity-building initiatives an example of evaluating without indicators self-evaluation (of a CBO) an example of how evaluation is carried out within the wider context of planning and on-going monitoring an example of evaluating evaluations a range of examples of how NGOs are using different techniques to assess their cost-effectiveness and examples of how NGOs are using different networks to learn from others experiences

Similarities with the donor-commissioned studies The following provides a list of some of the similarities with the donor-commissioned studies The paucity of detailed information on impact is confirmed not least because of data inadequacies and a focus on recording project outputs The case studies confirm the view that NGOs are more successful when implementing social projects and delivering services and considerably less successful when moving into the economic sphere Relatedly generalist NGOs often tend to be less effective at implementing more technical interventions than specialist ones The lack of poverty analysis found in the donor-commissioned studies is generally confirmed with some notable exceptions as are trade-offs between poverty reach and financial sustainability The lack of cost-effectiveness analysis is confirmed The sectoral studies on credit reviewed are probably less positive than most of the donor-commissioned studies except for most of the USAID studies in terms of sustainable increases in income and the sustainability of the implementing agencies The studies confirm the importance of the wider context in influencing project outcome Finally the importance attached to institutional and capacity-building is generally confirmed Indeed NGOs are often more self-critical than donors in relation to work in this area

Differences with the donor-commissioned studies However the NGO studies reviewed also provide a number of new ideas or give a different emphasis to themes and perspectives contained in the donor-commissioned studies Thus NGO studies tend to be more critical than donor-commissioned studies in pinpointing weaknesses This provides one reason why NGOs in some countries (Scandinavian NGOs are an exception) are reluctant to distribute evaluation studies The French study argues that beneficiaries are often not interested in financial sustainability it is in their interest to seek to maintain the flow of funds for as long as funders are willing to provide them It also cautions against judging impact in relation to changes in socio-economic status as poor people are often more interested in risk-minimisation

Conclusions and recommendations

This Study confirms the need to be extremely cautious about making generalisations about the impact of NGO development activities not least because – and in spite of the generalisations made in this Study – both the donor commissioned studies and NGOs own evaluations reveal wide variations in performance Relatedly one needs to be cautious about assuming that NGO development interventions *should* be judged in relation to changes in the living standards of the beneficiaries in some cases there are no clear beneficiaries while in others the direct purpose is not to enhance and improve living standards but increasingly to enhance the capacity of the implementors

Nonetheless the Study concludes that there is a need to enhance knowledge of impact and that this is likely to require not only further work on and improvements in methods of assessing impact but a wider focus of attention to embrace appraisal planning the establishment of base-lines and on-going monitoring This in turn is likely to be enhanced by encouraging networking of information on both methods and impact among and between NGOs and between NGOs and donors It argues that though there remains a need to enhance information on impact to those outside the project and outside particular NGOs there is also a pressing need to improve both methods of assessing impact and impact itself in order to learn and enhance future development impact The Study warns that impact data run the risk of bring misused and having the perverse if unintended effect of down-playing NGOs apparent strengths It recommends that donors and NGOs get together to examine this issue in some depth not only in order to unravel competing claims and assertions but in order to help to expand the common ground between donors and NGOs and to reduce potential conflict

The following constitute some of the Study's main additional recommendations

- In spite of the data-gaps which still exist the Study argues that donors should not commission another general study on impact Rather if further studies are commissioned it is recommended that they focus on sectoral or thematic issues

- Relatedly in any future sifting of the evidence the Study recommends a wider trawl of studies paying particular attention to research and more longitudinal studies

- It is recommended that donors encourage (and consider funding) further networking and information exchange among NGOs to share data on impact and evaluation methods

- The Study recommends a distinct initiative to examine how the need to assess the impact of smaller NGO development initiatives can be married with the concerns and views of smaller NGOs about current methods and approaches

- The Study recommends that donors provide funds to help strengthen NGOs own capacities to undertake evaluations to encourage the identification and ownership of home-grown" indicators of performance and to enhance planning and monitoring

- The Study recommends further work to examine the apparent trade-off between reaching the poor and achieving financial sustainability

- In order to enhance improve extend and experiment with different methods of evaluation the Report highlights a number of specific areas where additional work would be helpful Studies to clarify the (differing) role of the beneficiaries in evaluation vis-a-vis those of other stakeholders Work focused on methods of assessing non-project development interventions not least those focused on capacity-building advocacy and development education Further work on verification approaches building on the approach used in the Australian and Canadian studies Work focused on the development of relatively simple and practical methods adapted to (different) NGO development interventions to assess these against major cross-cutting issues such as gender and the environment Work focused on the whole issue of partnership specifically in relation to how this influences and is influenced by methods of assessing impact

- Finally it is recommended that the Report including the case studies be made available at least in both French and English and that it be circulated widely among NGOs

Reactions to the Report

In the six month period between the production of the 'draft final' and completed Report the Study was distributed to donors and NGOs for comment and a series of meetings took place to discuss the Report's findings and recommendations and possible next steps The final chapter of *The Main Report* summarises reactions and proposals for the future The overall reaction has been positive with no substantial criticism of the analysis conclusions or recommendations though specific criticisms were made However it is also clear that the overall Report was too long people simply did not have time to read it thoroughly

Eight clusters of negative comments were made Firstly the Study s TOR focusing predominantly on evaluation studies were thought to have been too narrow Secondly and relatedly it was argued that the Study underplayed the crucial links between planning monitoring and evaluation Thirdly it was felt that the Study should have focused more on methods and less on recording impact from quite poor data Fourthly the purpose of undertaking a synthesis in order to make generalisations about impact was challenged Fifthly it was argued that the Study failed to make clear the basis upon which impact was or ought to be judged Sixthly the Report

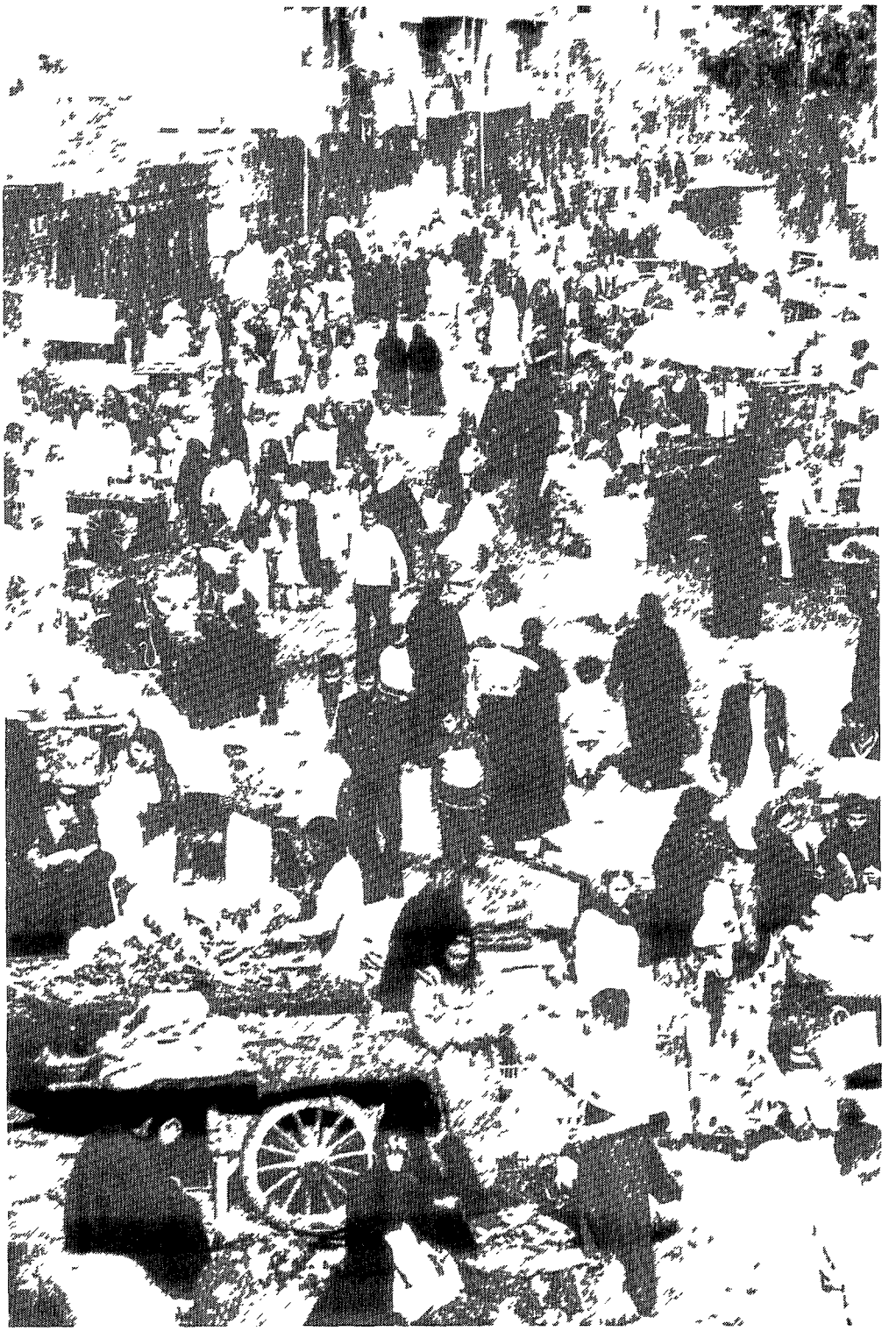
was criticised for not encompassing important NGO activities such as advocacy and development education Seventhly it was argued that the Study should have focused more on the nature of NGO-donor relations and the influence this can have on NGOs' ability to influence development Finally the Study was criticised for not focusing enough sufficiently on evaluation as a learning tool

Most of the Study s main recommendations were endorsed However additional recommendations were made – that further work be undertaken to understand better how performance can be improved to isolate more clearly what added value different NGO projects bring and to understand better how to assess (differently) development projects from longer-term processes It was also suggested that a study be conducted of what use NGOs make of evaluations and precisely why some recommendations are not implemented

Finally in a number of fora the question of whether some general guidelines for NGO evaluation should be developed was debated Though further discussion is needed the clear response especially from NGOs was broadly positive it was considered important and increasingly necessary to try to work towards developing some minimum standards for evaluation Some recommended that these be built not only on the DAC guidelines but on current experiments being undertaken with guidelines such as in India and Latin America

Part A

INTRODUCTION



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1

OVERVIEW

1 1 Introduction

This Study was commissioned by the OECD/DAC Expert Group on Aid Evaluation at its Paris meeting in October 1996 The agreed purpose was

> *to undertake a synthesis study of non governmental organisation (NGO) evaluations supplemented where easily accessible with related data and information in order firstly to provide an analysis and assessment of the impact including efficiency and effectiveness of NGO development interventions and secondly to provide an analysis and assessment of evaluation methods and approaches used*

NGOs are involved in a range of different activities [1] One subset of activities involves emergency and relief activities An early decision was that the synthesis should focus on NGO development interventions and not on NGO emergency and humanitarian activities [2] Likewise, within the development umbrella northern NGOs are involved in development education advocacy and lobbying work within their own countries and in networking internationally The research team also took the decision neither to trawl the literature to assess impact nor to synthesise studies examining the methods of assessing the impact of this cluster of development interventions and initiatives Thus the main focus of this Study has been development interventions implemented within developing countries In that context and as discussed further in Chapter 3 below, because of the nature of such interventions and the availability of literature the major focus of the Study is on assessing the impact and analysing the methods of assessing the impact of discrete projects Additionally some (though far less) attention is also focused on institutional and capacity building projects and longer term development processes not least because it has only been in the relatively recent past that NGO development work has expanded into these increasingly important areas and types of activity

1 2 Methods and approaches used in this Study

How should the Study s purpose be achieved and what methods and approaches should be used? Initially it might be thought that this would be relatively straightforward use a comprehensive database in order to gather all evaluation studies or if the numbers of studies are so large as to be unmanageable obtain and make use of a representative sample of such studies A late 1996 search of the OECD/DAC

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[1] While the term NGO is used throughout this Report the authors acknowledges that there has been considerable debate about the desirability of using the term non governmental organisation at all both because of the negative connotations of the term and because it clearly fails to capture the range of different organisations outside government private sector organisations and official donor agencies involved in the development process The Report also follows the United States convention of using the term private voluntary organisation (PVO) to describe United States non profit organisations

[2] This decision was influenced in part by the knowledge that at least one major parallel initiative was under way supported by the former British Overseas Development Administration (ODA) to undertake a synthesis of NGO activities in emergencies See Borton and Macrae (1997) Following the British elections in May the ODA ceased to exist and the Department For International Development (DFID) was created distinct from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office

database of evaluation abstracts for the years 1986 to 1997 recorded a total of 74 entries using the category NGO' and a total of 337 items using the keyword 'NGO' from a total listing of 6 341 entries Discussions with officials from almost all donor agencies during the course of this Study confirmed the initial view of the researchers that this database was incomplete and partial, and thus that it formed a wholly inadequate data set upon which to make a reliable synthesis of the impact of NGO development interventions Indeed, an early conclusion of this Study, corroborated repeatedly throughout the research period, is that an international database of NGO impact evaluations simply does not exist What is more, the case study work confirmed our initial hypothesis that there is not even a reliable and comprehensive database of all NGO evaluation studies at the country level in *any* of the 13 donor/country case studies

The method of gathering evaluation reports was initially to ask the different members of the OECD/DAC Evaluation Group to gather together and send evaluation reports focusing on the impact of NGO development interventions, and then synthesise them in order to summarise what they were saying about impact and methods of evaluation used It was the view of the researchers that for all its merits, this approach to data gathering would probably be deficient both in relation to impact data and in relation to evaluation methods Their experience and knowledge of NGO development activities suggested that relying on donor evaluation departments to forward reports to the researchers would

i run the risk of omitting evaluations and related studies undertaken by official aid agencies but not commissioned by evaluation departments,
ii be highly likely to omit evaluations undertaken and/or commissioned by northern NGOs, and
iii would almost certainly omit evaluations undertaken and/or commissioned by southern NGOs and community based organisations

Additionally, it was the view of the researchers that such an approach would be unlikely to provide a rounded picture of methods of evaluation used to assess the impact of NGO development initiatives This latter concern was rooted in the criticisms which have been voiced by NGOs of methods used to evaluate official aid interventions and, relatedly, because, in undertaking and commissioning their own evaluations, NGOs were unlikely to use methods of which they have been critical Again, and as discussed in Parts B and C, these concerns were strongly reinforced in the evidence gathered in the country case study evidence

As a result, it was decided that it would be necessary to try to supplement the data and information obtained from donor evaluation departments with data and information from NGOs within donor countries, and from NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) within developing countries These data and information would focus both on evaluations of the impact of NGO development interventions and on evaluation methods and approaches In short, the revised approach to be used aimed to gather data and information on impact and methods from three clusters of sources from official donor agencies, from northern NGOs and from southern NGOs and community based organisations

The initial method of obtaining information from donors has already been described it involved making contact with all members of the OECD/DAC Expert Group on Evaluation requesting them to send all relevant evaluation and related reports to the researchers The initial request for studies and reports was supplemented in two ways first by follow up letters, and secondly by telephone/fax and face to face discussions as and when researchers went to different countries

The attempt to fill gaps in knowledge about impact and evaluation methods by contacting northern and southern NGOs had to the tempered to the time available for the study The first phase of the Study involved reading the initial (donor-sent) evaluation reports and working out methods of gathering

additional data as well as writing the Study's *Inception Report* Thereafter it was decided that the main additional data gathering process would involve the following

- making postal and telecommunication contact with NGOs and NGO network and umbrella organisations explaining the purpose of the study and asking them to send what they considered were important evaluation studies and reports and examples of their own approaches to and methods of evaluating their development interventions,
- undertaking case studies in a selection of donor countries to obtain information on evaluations carried out and methods being used, and
- undertaking case studies in a (smaller) selection of southern countries, also to obtain information on evaluations carried out and methods and approaches being used by NGOs

In selecting countries for the case studies, the researchers were faced with a choice of undertaking a comparatively large number of case studies, but devoting only a very few days to each or undertaking far fewer studies, but undertaking a more in depth study As explained in the *Inception Report*, it was decided to undertake a relatively large number of case studies In all, 13 donor/country case studies were carried out, more within donor countries (eight) than in developing countries (five) The case study countries are listed in Box 1 1

Box 1 1 Country/donor case studies

Donors/donor countries	**Southern countries**
Belgium	Bangladesh
France	Brazil
The European Community	Chile
Finland	Kenya
The Netherlands	Senegal
Norway	
The United Kingdom	
The United States	

The fourfold purpose of the donor-based country case studies was

i To ensure that the donor-based evaluation studies sent to the researchers consisted of a complete set of recent donor-commissioned impact evaluations and where necessary to collect important additional studies
ii To gather data on development impact from evaluations undertaken or commissioned by northern NGOs focusing in particular on any synthesis thematic or sectoral studies which might have been carried out
iii To obtain information from NGOs on current attitudes methods and approaches to the evaluation of development interventions
iv To obtain data and information on linkages with southern NGOs in relation to evaluations undertaken or commissioned and interaction vis a-vis methods and approaches

The fourfold purpose of the southern-based country case studies was

i To gather data on impact from evaluations undertaken or commissioned by southern NGOs, focusing in particular on any synthesis, thematic or sectoral studies which might have been carried out
ii To obtain information from southern NGOs on current attitudes, methods and approaches to the evaluation of development interventions and, in that context, to assess the extent to which methods are influenced by northern or other southern NGOs
iii To obtain information on the extent to which southern NGO evaluations are commissioned by northern NGOs vis a-vis being home-grown southern based initiatives
iv To obtain data and information on self evaluation activities of community-based organisations and the extent to which knowledge about impact and methods are shared with southern NGOs, northern NGOs and donors

The extent to which the Study was successful in meeting these objectives is discussed in Parts B and C

1 3 Outputs and timing

Using the data gathered, the researchers carried out a number of tasks The first was the production of the Study's *Inception Report* which was completed by the end of December 1996 and circulated to the members of the OECD/DAC Evaluation Group It was discussed at a meeting of the Group in Copenhagen in February 1997 A second task was to undertake a synthesis of the main donor-commissioned evaluations of the impact of NGO development interventions A third was to undertake and write reports for the 13 donor/country case studies A fourth was to gather together some of the main/larger thematic and sectoral reports to analyse what data and information these provided on impact and evaluation methods A fifth task was to use the data and information from the reports and country case studies to provide an analysis and assessment of evaluation methods and approaches used A sixth task was to bring together all these different components and attempt both to provide some overarching reflective conclusions and to draw lessons from the data analysed A seventh task was to draw together the threads in order to compile the final draft of this Report and its appendices An eighth task was to circulate the draft final Report to donors and NGOs in the north and south in order to obtain comments and reactions to the Report and its conclusions A ninth task has to draft an additional chapter summarising the comments made and views expressed A final task was add the additional chapter to this Report and correct errors made in the draft final version

The timing of the work was as follows

November–December 1996	Initial reading of the (largely) donor-commissioned reports already gathered, discussion of methods and approaches to be used, carrying out the first (pilot) country case study (Kenya), discussion and preparation of the *Inception Report*
January–February 1997	Carrying out the 12 other donor/country case studies and writing up the donor/country case study reports, analysis of the donor based studies, and initial analysis of the main thematic/sectoral studies
March–early April 1997	Finalising the country case study, donor commissioned and thematic/sectoral reports meeting of researchers to agree conclusions and recommendations, writing up of the main Report
May-November 1997	Circulating the draft final report for comment and obtain comments especially from NGOs, and writing final version of the Report

1 4 The structure of this Report

Following this introduction, the rest of the Report is divided into three parts *Part B Searching for Impact* summarises what is known about the impact of NGO development interventions *Chapter 2 Data and Data Quality* discusses the sources and quality of the data used *Chapter 3 Donor-Based Impact Studies*, summarises the impact results from the 10 main donor-commissioned studies highlighting the areas of agreement and disagreement between these studies, and ending with a summary of the factors these studies consider critical in accounting for successes and failures With the conclusions of these donor commissioned studies as a backdrop, *Chapter 4 The Country and Donor Case Studies* draws out the main impact conclusions from the 13 donor/country case studies, highlighting where these confirm or challenge the results and conclusions of the donor-commissioned studies Finally, *Chapter 5 Thematic and Sectoral Studies of Impact* summarises some of the main conclusions on impact drawn from some key thematic and sectoral studies

Part C Searching for Methods switches from impact to a discussion of methods of evaluating NGO development interventions *Chapter 6 Introduction* provides an overview of this part and draws a range of conclusions concerning the degree of consensus among donors and between donors and NGOs on methods to be used, the gaps in methods, and possible future directions *Chapter 7 Methods and Approaches in Donor Commissioned Studies*, looks more closely at methods used and discusses the ways in which, and the extent to which, donors and NGOs are approaching evaluation differently, and the gaps between rhetoric and reality *Chapter 8 Methods and Approaches beyond the Donor Commissioned Studies* briefly summarises the data on methods provided by the case studies, drawing in places on the wider literature

Finally, *Part D Lessons Learnt Recommendations and Reactions*, contains two chapters *Chapter 9 Lessons Learnt and Recommendations* draws a number of overarching conclusions, points to continuing gaps in knowledge about impact and evaluation methods, highlights a number of lessons drawn directly from the Study and outlines a number of ideas for follow up Finally, *Chapter 10 Initial Comments on the Report* summarises reactions to the draft final version of the Report based largely on a series of meetings (largely with NGOs) at which the Report and its findings were discussed

This main Report ends with *Annex A References Cited* This is split into two parts the first lists the main donor-commissioned studies used in the synthesis chapters (3 and 7), the second lists only additional texts cited directly in the main Report

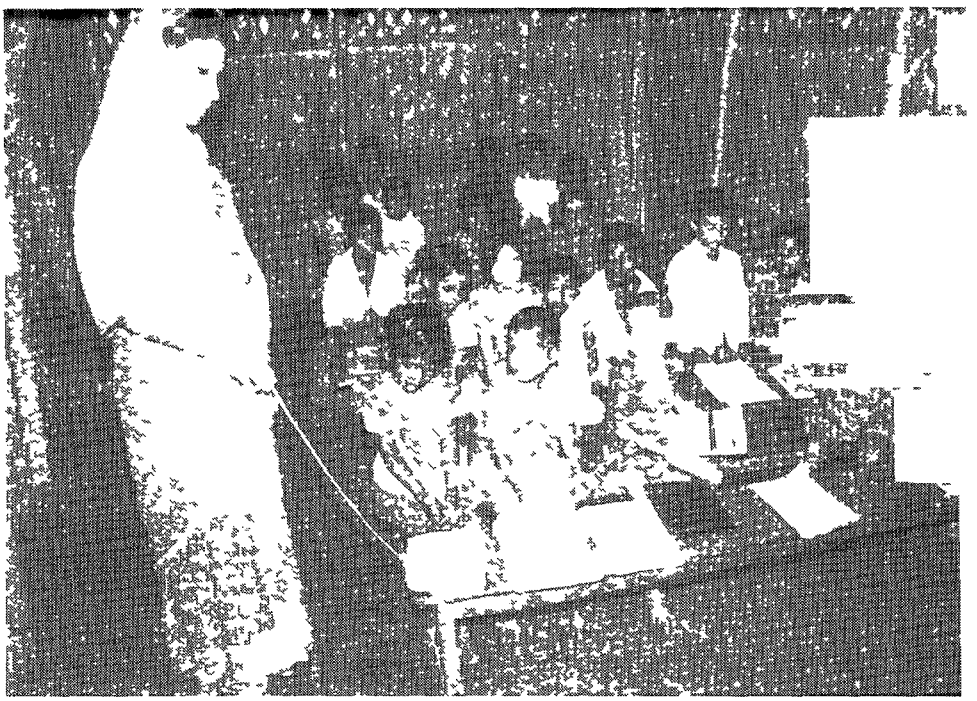
In addition to the main Study are the Report s appendices This volume can be obtained from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland [3] It contains 14 separate sections *Appendices 1–8* consist of the eight donor-based studies commissioned for this Study and *Appendices 9–12* are the five southern based country studies commissioned for the Study While each appendix contains its own annex and listing of studies cited *Appendix 14* brings all these references together supplementing them with other texts used in the overall Study It needs to be acknowledged however that some texts especially some confidential evaluation studies and reports, were forwarded to the team on condition they would not be cited directly In these cases the works provided have not been referenced This volume is especially useful for those who wish to have examples of current evaluation approaches used by different NGOs in the sample countries

[3] Evaluation Department Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland Department for International Development Cooperation Helsinki Finland

Photo UN/Louise Gubb

Part B

SEARCHING FOR IMPACT



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2

DATA AND DATA QUALITY

2 1 Introduction

This part of the Report presents the Study s findings on the impact of NGO development interventions Before these are presented, however it is necessary to discuss the nature and quality of the data upon which these conclusions are based This is important – and this introductory section needs to be viewed as a constituent part of the data presentation – because there is a risk that readers will interpret the results presented as firm' whereas the thrust of this discussion is to suggest that they should be viewed more as 'initial and more tentative'

2 2 Numbers of evaluations

The impact evidence presented here is based predominantly on evaluation studies of NGO development interventions some single, stand alone studies, some themselves syntheses of individual studies An initial major group of studies consists of analyses undertaken at the promptings of official donor agencies As discussed in §3 2 below, these focus predominantly on a core block of studies from ten donor agencies This core block of studies involved the assessment of some 230 separate NGO development projects and programmes Discussions with donor agency officials indicate that even for these countries, the studies fall well short of the total number of donor commissioned evaluation studies Taking into account the donor agencies from which evaluation data and reports were not forthcoming, it seems safe to assume that the current sample of discrete and overview evaluations constitutes well under half the overall number of evaluations of NGO development initiatives undertaken or commissioned by official agencies

Of perhaps greater significance is that it is *certain* that these discrete and overview evaluations constitute a tiny minority of all evaluations of NGO development interventions which have been undertaken in the last five, ten, 15 or 20 years – or ever Besides evaluations which donors know about (often because they have commissioned them) there are evaluations which northern NGOs have carried out for their own purposes, evaluations which northern NGOs have carried out with southern NGOs, and evaluations which southern NGOs have conducted without reference to the north Additionally as the case study evidence shows, there are also self-evaluations undertaken by smaller NGOs and community based organisations but which have no written documentation at all

How many evaluations are out there ? This is a very difficult question to answer for three main reasons Firstly neither northern nor southern NGOs keep an accurate record of all the evaluations which they have carried out sometimes (especially in the case of larger organisations) as evaluations are done in the field which are not recorded at the centre Secondly it is a strong characteristic of many (probably most) evaluations undertaken by NGOs that these remain *outside* the public domain the vast majority have not been published and as the attempt to gather evaluations during this Study confirmed, many NGOs are not willing to release them, though across Scandinavia there is a far more open attitude to sharing reports than is apparent in most other areas Thirdly, and by their nature, evaluations assessments and self evaluations which are not written down cannot be gathered and collected

Focusing solely on those evaluations for which there are written reports, the case study evidence indicates that these stretch well into the thousands For instance the UK study suggested that there are over 1,000 evaluation studies of development projects funded or executed by UK NGOs, the US study put the figure for US PVOs well in excess of 3,000, the Norwegian study judged that directly and indirectly Norwegian NGOs are involved in some 500 evaluations a year, while the Kenyan study suggested that currently there may be well over 600 studies currently carried out each year which address at least some impact questions Building on and extending these sorts of numbers, it would not be surprising to find (if it were ever possible to count them all) that the total cumulative number of evaluation reports and studies of NGO development initiatives is in excess of 25 000 and could be double that number [1] The evaluation studies and reports used in this synthesis study are listed in *Appendix 14* Excluding the donor-initiated studies these amount to some 350 reports [2] If the population of all evaluation reports totalled 25,000 the selection used in the current study would amount to only 1 4% of this total

2 3 Sample representativeness

The absolute size of any sample matters less than the extent to which it is representative of the whole population To what extent is the current sample representative? The short answer is simply that we do not know However, it is possible to pursue the question further through different avenues

Representative (statistically rigorous) sampling matters less where the results of the studies tend to be similar To some extent this is borne out by the results discussed below there would appear to be a core cluster of conclusions on different aspects of impact which recur frequently, though there are also other results around which far less of a consensual picture emerges However it is also important to bear in mind one potential caveat the degree to which there is consensus among the different stakeholders that the conclusions contained in the evaluations are themselves broadly accepted The Study found some differences of view on this matter notably from the Australian study and from a recent Dutch study (GOM, 1995), though it found more discussion that there *might* be dispute than *evidence* of it occurring in practice [3]

One area where there seems to be stronger evidence of potential bias in the cluster of evaluations reviewed concerns a high proportion of the donor initiated evaluations and the reports which have been provided for review and synthesis Thus, while most studies tried to make a representative trawl of projects in order to select those for closer scrutiny, there is no doubt that this group of evaluations is biased towards those development initiatives which the NGOs, at least, view as among their most successful [4] Indeed, a number of the donor/country case studies use this fact to make the comment that

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[1] There are of course far more discrete projects and programmes underway at any one time Accurate aggregate data of numbers are even less easy to guess A recent Dutch study indicated that in the Netherlands in 1994 where 6 022 individual projects were supported by official funds some 300 external evaluations had been conducted (GOM 1995)

[2] It should be noted that a number of these are themselves synthesis reports of a number of discrete project evaluations It has not been possible in the time available to add up exactly the number of discrete evaluations encompassed in the listings in *Appendix 14*

[3] Initial findings from the study being carried out concurrently with the current study for the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) provide stronger evidence of disputes about the conclusions drawn in a number of Canadian evaluations of NGO development activities

[4] Some studies emphasis this bias very strongly Thus Barclay *et al* (1979 6) explain that

> *a deliberate effort was made to identify projects that were thought to be successful in producing such impact*

NGOs tend to be harsher and more critical in their own evaluations of their development activities than are externally- and especially donor-initiated studies To the extent that the views of NGOs are consistent with the assessments made, the results and conclusions summarised here would tend to give a relatively more favourable review of impact than a more random sample Of course, these issues and the conclusions contained in the evaluation reports are only valid to the extent that one can be sure of the integrity and quality of the reports an issue to which we now turn

2 4 The quality of the evaluation reports

The veracity of the conclusions on impact drawn here depends not merely on the representativeness of the reports surveyed They depend also, critically, on the quality of those reports To what extent can one be sure that the reports reviewed are of sufficient quality to convince one that they accurately portray NGO development impact? Though it has not been possible in the time available to answer this question scientifically, sufficient evidence has been unearthed to raise questions about quality, as the next few paragraphs try to explain

An initial response is the simple but overarching one that the issue of quality matters In some ways this whole study was built on the (unstated) premise that the synthesis of sufficient *numbers* of (hopefully representative) evaluations will tell us interesting things about impact It is this assumption which needs to be looked at a little more closely Thus, if there is one consistent theme to come out of the majority of the country case studies it is that for the sheer numbers of evaluations that have been carried out, there are very few rigorous studies which examine impact improvements in the lives and livelihoods of the beneficiaries Most studies are dominated by a documentation of outputs, some merely describe a number of project activities There are two types of reasons why it is necessary to 'flag' the issue of quality Firstly, a common feature of most (and until recently the vast majority of) NGO development interventions has been the failure to provide baseline data, the failure to monitor and assess projects and programmes on an ongoing basis against the original position, and the failure to try to disentangle the contribution of the project and/or programme inputs to the outcomes achieved As a result, most of the 'better quality' impact studies which have included visits to project sites (and by no means all have done this) have had to use a variety of proxy techniques (focus-group discussions, recall, comparative static analysis) to try to assess impact Relatedly, the bulk of impact assessment studies, often those with larger budgets and more professional evaluators, highlighted weaknesses caused by the shortage of time within which to conduct their analyses

Though this conclusion that much of the evidence is likely to be weak might be viewed as depressing for a study one of whose main purposes is to report on impact, it needs to be viewed in broader perspective Thus, a recent review of Norwegian official aid concludes that (Norbye and Ofsted, 1994 47)

> *Practically all evaluations of development aid projects also suffer from insufficient data and unclear statements of objectives which make precise measurements of goal attainments impossible*

The (varying) quality of existing evaluation studies leads to the second concern about quality namely the skills and abilities of the evaluators and thus the quality of the reports written and the reliability of the results reported While a large proportion of the evaluation reports appear to indicate careful work and a genuine attempt to assess results and to ensure the accuracy of the conclusions drawn there is no doubt that the reports gathered embrace an *extremely* wide variety in quality In some cases assertions are made – about impact, about the achievement of objectives, about cost effectiveness about relevance and about sustainability – which are supported by no evidence whatsoever As in a number of cases these reports appear to have been written by people with few apparent skills in undertaking evaluation, there are grave doubts about the extent to which one can make use of the conclusions drawn In other words

the synthesis study has shown that it is extremely important not merely to analyse the results but also to be sure that the evaluation studies are of sufficient quality and integrity to be used at all

An appreciation of these factors places many of the donor-commissioned studies in a slightly different light than one dominated merely by numbers and statistical sampling issues Thus, one characteristic of most (though not all) of the donor-commissioned evaluation studies is that they have been undertaken by qualified (teams of) evaluators aware of the weaknesses of much of the available (and self-generated) data and information While it is not being argued for one moment that evaluations undertaken by NGOs (north and south) are uniformly of a lower quality than the donor initiated studies – many are of very high quality, undertaken sometimes by the same skilled evaluators sometimes by more experienced evaluators – these factors do provide an additional reason for focusing on these donor initiated studies Indeed, it is as a result of both these factors and the relatively easy access to donor-initiated studies that the method of presenting the impact results in the next three chapters of this Report has been to summarise what these donor-initiated studies have to say about impact and to use this information and these conclusions as a benchmark for comparing the results and conclusions of impact coming (largely) from the country case studies and the synthesis of some of the key thematic and sectoral studies from which information and data have been gathered

A further assumption of the whole Study needs to be raised in this context the link between evaluation reports and impact If the assumption which lay behind the objective of reviewing evaluation reports was that these provide sufficient data and information from which to draw conclusions about impact, then another conclusion of this Study is that this assumption is incorrect While it is certainly true that evaluation studies which are based on rigorous appraisal and continual monitoring are able to throw considerable light on impact questions, it is also important to note that evaluation studies by no means provide all the data and information which are available to inform the overall discussion on impact Partly because of the paucity of good impact studies, an extremely rich source of data and information on the impact of NGO development initiatives comes from a range of research analyses and research studies as well as a range of other documentation found within NGOs, such as trip and back-ro office reports This is not a surprising conclusion research tends to be an activity of longer duration than discrete evaluations and so is better able to assess longer term and wider factors influencing change [5]

While it is relatively easy to draw a distinction between evaluations and research, a related problem the Study faced was deciding on a hard and fast definition of evaluation One problem is that some 'evaluations' are little more than reviews which, as already indicated, merely report on activities undertaken or tasks completed Equally mid-term evaluations, especially, can be a rich source of data on impact, especially when undertaken in the context of ongoing monitoring Additionally, very few of the evaluations reviewed were assessments made after project- or programme completion, most took place during but most commonly towards the end of, a funding cycle One consequence of this is that *most* of the comments made about sustainability, both institutional and financial, tend to be forward looking assessments of the future rather than accurate accounts of actual (historic) performance

A final quality issue that needs to be highlighted concerns the process and methods used to judge how evaluations should be done, how impact ought to be assessed, and (of major concern to NGOs) the role of the beneficiaries in the evaluation process These issues are of such importance that the whole of *Part*

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[5] Some reports have gone so far as to argue that evaluations are less valuable than research (Sebsted and Chen 1996)

> *because they are less rigorous and do not cover the same variables the findings are not as useful in addressing some of the bigger policy questions*

C of this Report is devoted to addressing and discussing them For the purposes of this part of the report, however, they are set to one side The focus of the next three chapters is on what evaluations say and have said about impact, the question of whether they were asking all the right questions will be discussed separately below

2 5 A dynamic and changing picture

For all the problems, qualifications and refinements made in this chapter, it is encouraging to end on a more optimistic note A common conclusion from all the country case studies is that impact assessment is not merely an issue of great interest to both donors and NGOs, but it is one in which there is a large amount of activity Fifteen, ten or in some cases even five years ago, there was very little rigorous or systematic evaluation activity initiated by NGOs, with the notable and important exception of North America Thus, in Europe and Australasia especially, when donors began to talk about and commission evaluations of NGO development activities this was in many respects a novelty and an initiative which on a number of occasions drew sceptical, and sometimes hostile, responses from NGOs

Today in contrast, most evaluation activity is undertaken by NGOs and not by donors, and most impact evaluation is undertaken because NGOs want to know what their impact is and how to improve on it in the future As a result, many evaluations are framed not as one off discrete initiatives, but as part of a wider process encompassing monitoring and increasingly, some form of capacity building Another related feature of contemporary NGO evaluation and linked work is that it is viewed by many as experimental, with different ways of evaluating and assessing impact being discussed and field tested the separate volume containing the county case studies contain a wealth of examples of different methods and approaches to evaluation used by NGOs across the sample set of countries

One consequence of these trends is that, over the past five to seven years, the number of evaluations which have been carried out has expanded rapidly Additionally there would seem to be little doubt that, especially in the case of larger and middle-sized NGOs, the quality of evaluations is improving, becoming more systematic and rigorous The first implication of these trends is that the synthesis of evaluations of NGO development interventions undertaken for this Study is unlikely to provide a good guide to impact for very long and may well have a relatively short 'shelf life'

But what is the connection – if any – between the quality of evaluations and the data upon which these evaluations are based, and the impact of development interventions? Initially, it might be thought that better quality evaluations and a more rigorous assessment of the quality of the data upon which judgements on impact are to be made will tend to have a detrimental effect on the impact data produced and placed in the public domain This is because a growth in the quality of assessment is likely to lead to the publication of fewer reports which confirm the apparent strengths and attributes of NGOs on the basis of assertion or flimsy evidence What is therefore of interest is that some of the country case studies suggest that there is likely to be a more direct and virtuous link between interest and increasing rigour in undertaking evaluations and the development impact of the interventions being reviewed and assessed More specifically it is argued that there seems to be a link between concern with and ability to appraise, monitor and evaluate and the quality and likely impact of NGO development interventions, not least because of a deeper appreciation of the complexity and difficulties of engaging in development and of the naivety of a number of earlier development efforts Such a conclusion supports the decision taken in this Study not merely to report on what evaluations say about impact but to extend the discussion to a focus on methods used and evolving practices It is in this context that we turn now to summarise what the donor-commissioned reports from the ten donors tell us about impact

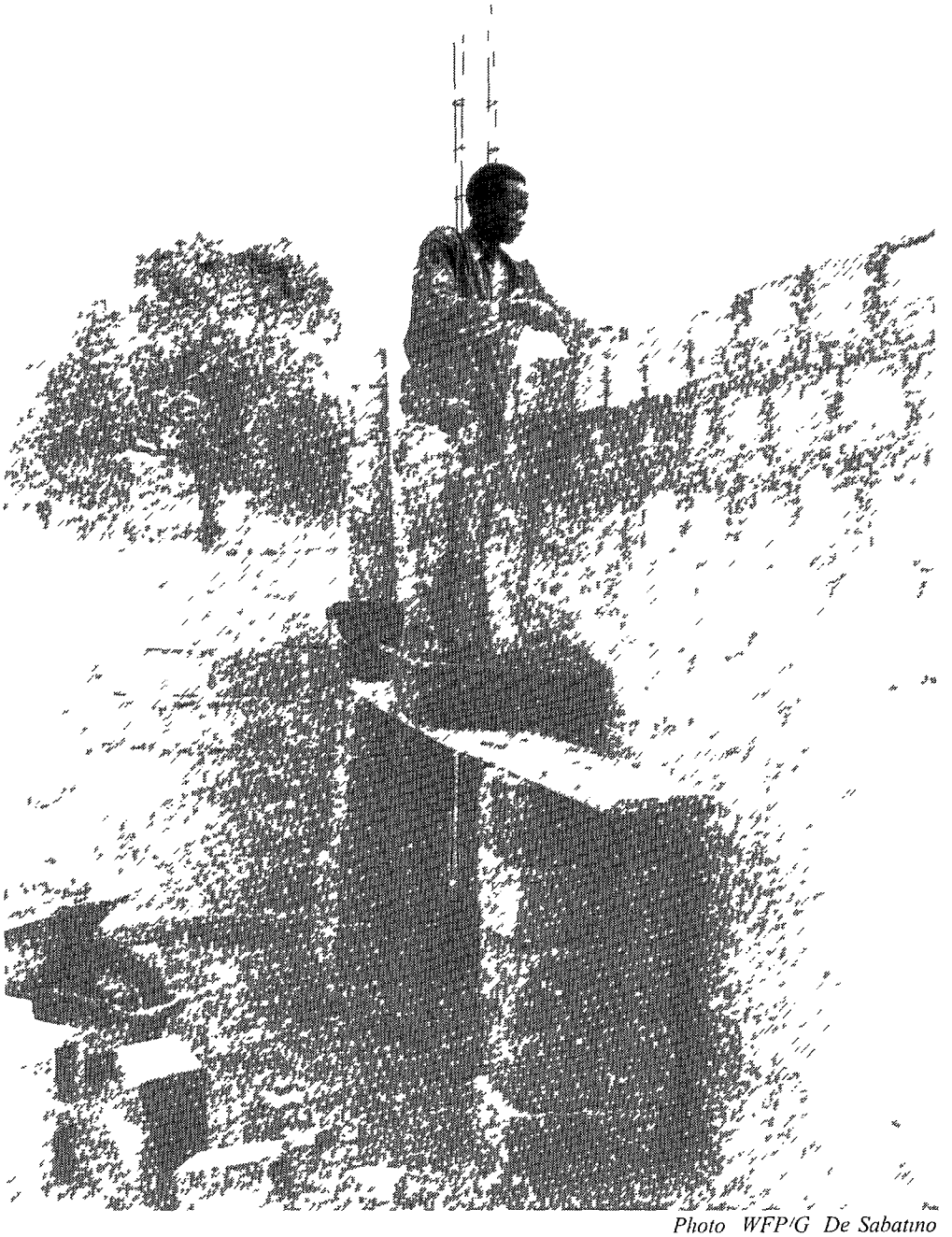

Photo WFP/G De Sabatino

3

DONOR-BASED IMPACT STUDIES

3 1 Introduction and approach

Over the last five to ten years (longer in the case of the United States), a growing number of individual donors have undertaken themselves or more commonly commissioned one or more studies of their major NGO programmes, or a sizeable selection of projects funded through these programmes, focusing broadly on impact Though it would be wrong to lump all of these together and treat them homogeneously – for they all use different approaches and methods, they differ in scope and intensity, and some are sub components of wider analyses and discussions – there is sufficient in common to the majority of these studies to make it possible to group them and try to analyse them together in order to draw out common threads and differences For the purposes of this synthesis study, the main studies and, where available and accessible, individual and country reports, were analysed for ten major OECD donors, supplemented, where available, with evaluations commissioned by the European Commission [1] The countries and the years when some of their major evaluations were published are shown in Box 3 1 [2]

These are not the only donors who have undertaken or commissioned substantive evaluation studies of their NGO programmes Belgium, Germany and Switzerland, among the bilateral agencies, the World Bank and various United Nations agencies have all undertaken or commissioned substantive studies either of NGO activities in particular countries or particular NGOs or clusters of NGOs A number of these are referenced in *Appendix 14* and the findings of many are incorporated into the discussion [3]

The documentation produced for these ten donor evaluations/assessments and the other donor studies used in this synthesis consists of almost 60 separate reports, covering a large number and geographical spread of countries, and a significant number of project visits Thus, between them, the main evaluation studies conducted by these ten donors have involved 60 country visits to 26 different developing countries, 11 in Africa, four in Latin America, two in Central America, three in South Asia, three in the rest of Asia, and three in the Pacific [4] Seven donor studies also included separate country studies, at least three of which attempted a wider analysis of the projects visited in the context of the overall NGO effort

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[1] The Commission s study on community level development actions covered 72 NGOs in 18 countries (Beaudoux *et al* 1990) its study on institutional development for grassroots organisations looked at 27 projects (de Crombrugghe *et al* 1993) its study of integrated development projects covered 22 projects and entailed six field trips (Debuyst 1994) and it has recently published a study of its funding of NGOs in South Africa covering 739 different funding contracts (SPM Consultants 1996)

[2] The donor driven nature of the evaluations conducted differed from country to country Some such as the Danish Finnish Norwegian and Swedish studies involved their respective national NGOs and NGO umbrella organisations in drawing up the terms of reference for these studies others such as the UK and some of the main US studies did not The 1991 Dutch study differed from most others inasmuch as the NGO umbrella group the Gemeenschappelijk Overleg Medefinanciering (GOM) rather than the government agency played a prominent part on the whole evaluation process However it is included here for three reasons first it used a methodology strikingly similar to other donor commissioned studies secondly the Ministry played an important role in drawing up the terms of reference for this Study and thirdly the Ministry broadly accepted the orientation and conclusions of the study

[3] Between 1989 and 1993 Germany produced six major reports As these remain confidential they are not quoted directly in this Report while more recently Ireland has undertaken the first of a number of planned NGO evaluations

[4] One of two US studies (GAO 1995) included Romania as one of eight countries visited

Within this cluster 30 separate country studies were conducted though these only covered 19 countries because of country duplication [5] In all, assessments were made of 240 projects in visits to these countries In addition, four donor studies involved desk reviews of project reports in three cases these covered reviews of 492 projects [6]

Box 3 1 List of donors whose studies are included in this synthesis

Donor	Year of Major Studies (publication date)
Australia	1995
Canada	1992
Denmark	1988,* 1989, 1994,[1] 1995
Finland	1994, 1995*
New Zealand	1987, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993
The Netherlands	1991[2]
Norway	1994, 1995
Sweden	1995,[3]
The United Kingdom	1992/5,[4] 1995
The United States	1979, 1995, 1996[5]

Notes
* Evaluation of volunteer programmes
1 Evaluation of framework agreements
2 In 1995 the Dutch NGOs produced a report on measures taken in response to the 1991 report
3 From 1987, Sida has commissioned studies on the capacity of the 13 (originally 14) framework organisations
4 There was an early, very sketchy UK study in 1986 The 1992 (ODI) study was published in book form in 1995, the year the second UK study s findings were published
5 Besides the 1979 and 1995 studies, USAID has conducted a succession of reviews of reviews – in 1988, 1994 and 1996 – many of which have also addressed the issue of impact

For complete references to these reports, and their linked studies see the Annex to the main Report as well as *Appendix 14*

How representative are these studies of the NGO development interventions? While it is not easy to give a complete answer, the following points provide at least a partial answer The first point to be made is that this sample of studies focuses predominantly on the assessments of *discrete projects*, though some mention is made of other types of intervention, notably assessments of capacity building and institutional strengthening initiatives The reason for this clustering is that until recently this was the dominant, in some cases the only form of intervention *in developing countries* which was being funded In recent years there has been an expansion in funds given to NGOs for undertaking institutional strengthening

[5] Not all these country studies nor a number of the sub components of major evaluation studies have been translated into English (for instance some of the Dutch and Norwegian studies) and so could not be incorporated into the current analysis Additionally it should be noted that donors and donors in cooperation with NGOs have carried out country studies outside the framework of these main studies indeed in the last five years there has been a rapid growth in country studies especially by large northern NGOs

[6] In the fourth case (Canada) the number of reviews surveyed was not given in the report

initiatives, however, there has been quite a lag in studies focusing on assessing the impact of such initiatives Additionally, this sample does not consider other NGO development initiatives, such as advocacy work and development education However, within the project perspective, it does include a number of projects focusing on consciousness-raising and efforts to enhance democratic processes

Secondly a reading of the reports indicates that with the exception of the first UK study which focused on economic/income generating projects, a deliberate attempt was made to try to obtain a good spread of different NGO activities Thirdly, however, it is apparent that the combined total of just 240 individual projects is a small sample of total NGO projects and programmes funded by donors aggregate figures from the Australian Danish, Dutch and Swedish studies indicated that the combined total of projects assessed in their studies (100) accounted for less than 1% of the total then being funded by their respective donor agencies Fourthly, if one takes the 'ballpark' global figure of 25,000 evaluations referred to in Chapter 2, this cluster of some 240 projects represents a minute 0 9% of this total Another point to stress is that the bulk of the projects assessed are those which have been funded through northern NGOs and exclude studies which have focused on southern NGO projects funded directly by donors [7]

Though these ten sets of donor assessment studies have been grouped together because they are each trying (broadly) to answer questions about the impact of NGO development interventions, a number of more specific limitations need to be highlighted Firstly, different approaches and methods of assessment have been used Thus, while most have tried to undertake analysis with a high degree of rigour and focus on areas common to the main thrust of evaluation (relevance, impact, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability), others are more loosely structured in their approach [8] A second methodological issue raised in over 80 per cent of the donor studies was the shortage of time in which to undertake the project evaluations A number of reports argued that there was insufficient time to undertake rigorous evaluations, leading some to rephrase their efforts as assessments rather than evaluations Thirdly, and relatedly, the purpose of some of these studies (such as the Finnish and Norwegian studies) was not so much to conduct impact evaluations of *individual projects* but more to use projects to 'gain a sense of the overall structure and nature of Finnish NGO activities in each country' (Riddell *et al* 1994 105)

It is within this context that the remaining sections of this chapter attempt an initial summary of what these studies have said about a range of issues directly and indirectly linked to impact Section §3 11 goes beyond the data and comments made in the reports about what *has* happened to summarise some of the main conclusions about *the causes for* the impact of NGO development interventions that have been found It should be stressed that by no means all the studies address all the issues discussed

It is no easy matter to try to cluster together these different explanations over the course of 20 or so pages of text Thus to repeat a comment made earlier in this Report, what is written here is a *summary* of the findings and conclusions of the documents reviewed (in some cases this means a summary of a summary) Inevitably compressing the many qualifications which are made in the majority of these reports runs the risk of distortion For those wishing to pursue the different issues raised here in more depth there is clearly no substitute for reading the complete reports

[7] Lewis *et al* (1994) and Hashemi *et al* (1996) provide an assessment of projects directly funded by Sida in Bangladesh India and Sri Lanka while Davis *et al* (1996) reviews the direct funding of NGOs using ODA funds in Kenya Tanzania and Uganda

[8] For instance the 1990 New Zealand evaluation did not address the issues of cost effectiveness poverty or sustainability and made no comments on either gender or environmental issues (Rivers Buchan Associates 1990 17 and ff)

3 2 The achievement of objectives

A core question which almost all of the donor studies ask and attempt to answer (the New Zealand, Danish and Norwegian studies are exceptions here) is whether the projects and programmes for which donors have provided funds have achieve their stated objectives

In broad terms, the answers are extremely positive, providing a consistent picture across almost all donor studies which have reported on the issue, and over a long time period Indeed, the majority of studies which provide quantitative data record that 90 per cent or more of projects examined had achieved their immediate objectives Australia (Kershaw *et al* 1995), Sweden (Riddell *et al* 1995a) the United Kingdom (Surr, 1995), the United States (GAO, 1995, Jordan, 1996) The Canadian study produces the lowest aggregate figure (82 per cent) (Fortin *et al* 1992) the first UK study producing a figure of 88 per cent (Riddell and Robinson, 1992), though the Zimbabwe country study produced for the Swedish study found that only 66 per cent (of 13 projects) achieved their objectives (Riddell *et al* 1995b) While the Finnish study stated that the objectives, by and large, had been achieved, it failed to provide a figure for the share of projects examined which it judged to have achieved their objectives [9]

However, another comment appearing in almost half the donor studies which, in some ways, would appear to contradict the extremely positive ratings just given, is the view that in many cases it is not easy to assess project performance against objectives Three reasons are given objectives are not cited, objectives are too vague, and there are too many objectives These sorts of comments appear in some of the (confidential) German studies, in the Dutch study (GOM, 1991), as well as in the Swedish and second of the UK studies (Riddell *et al* 1995a, and Surr, 1995) [10] Interestingly, no mention was made of failure to achieve objectives because they had been altered or because the original ones were no longer relevant

Different elements of the Swedish study, in particular, pointed to the need to be cautious about placing too much emphasis on the achievement of immediate objectives, arguing that focusing narrowly on the achievement of objectives really said very little about impact – indeed, that it 'provided little guidance to the overall *development* impact of the projects in question when viewed more broadly (Riddell *et al* 1995a 12) The Bolivian case study is even more dismissive, arguing that (Bebbington & Kopp 1995 40)

> *Assessing projects against their immediate objectives is more a description of what they have done than an analysis of the developmental relevance of what they have done*

Finally, it is worth drawing attention to at least one comparison which these studies made to official aid projects Thus, in 1996, a British ODA study reported that 76 per cent of its projects by number and 65 per cent by value were judged successfully to have achieved their immediate objectives (Robbins and Modi, 1996) If this a fair reflection of the performance of other donors, then this batch of NGO studies would suggest that NGO development projects have performed as well as, if not better than, official aid projects

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[9] One of the Finnish country studies (Nepal) judged that 75 per cent of the projects examined had achieved their objectives (Riddell and Jha 1994)

[10] It is particularly odd that these latter two studies can on the one hand report on the achievement of objectives and on the other state that the objectives were not clearly stated

3 3 Impact livelihoods, poverty reach and alleviation of poverty

What has been the overall impact of these NGO projects and programmes on the lives of the people assisted? The first point to make, and to repeat the comment made in Chapter 2, is that though most of the studies sought answers to this question, they found it *very* difficult to produce firm evidence The study of Finnish NGOs in Tanzania provides one answer why at least for health projects namely that there was no data, and no monitoring took place (Nkya *et al* 1995) Repeated references to poor or inadequate data meant that a number of studies failed to be drawn on the issue of wider impact, most providing qualitative rather than quantitative answers to the question The rest of the comments in this section need to be viewed in this light

3 3 1 Impact on livelihoods in general

Overall, and as noted, a reading of the studies suggests that there is some reluctance to provide a firm view on the wider impact of NGO interventions Some, such as a number of the (confidential) German reports stated that it is not possible to derive firm conclusions on impact More typical would be the Finnish study which stated (with little supporting evidence) that the projects examined had made a positive impact on the poor Though little hard data was provided the summary report noted that in three of the four countries studied, some of the projects were rated amongst the best in comparison with the efforts of either the host country or bilateral agencies

The earliest USAID study (Barclay *et al* 1979) reported in broad terms that the participating populations were receiving at least some positive benefits in every case In contrast to subsequent studies, it provided some quantitative assessment, namely that 18 per cent of projects had high impact, 47 per cent moderate impact and 35 per cent had low impact – though without defining the boundaries of these categories

More representative would be the Dutch study which warned against expecting any dramatic results in terms of improvements in livelihoods Within this sort of perspective, the Zimbabwe case study for the Swedish study stated that the impact on the socio economic status of the beneficiaries was exceptionally weak and that because the NGOs examined tended to work with existing structures, they tended to strengthen rather than challenge existing power and wealth relationships and to make it more difficult to narrow income differentials, a conclusion drawn in the Finnish Nepal study, too, for some projects examined The earlier Zimbabwe case study done for the first UK study (Muir, 1992) states not merely that there has been little or on impact on livelihoods in some projects, but that the beneficiaries are more dependent upon the NGOs than they had ben prior to the project, making them even more vulnerable than they were

A related conclusion drawn in some studies (the Finnish and the Dutch) is that whatever the impact on livelihoods is it tends to be confined quite narrowly to the direct beneficiaries In other words impact is localised and has limited reach However the first UK study (Riddell and Robinson 1992) disagrees, arguing that the projects they examined exhibited characteristics of both spread and trickle down'

Overall discussion and conclusions about impact in the studies are far richer when discussing not livelihoods in general but the issue of poverty more particularly Here we consider two aspects of poverty appearing in the reports poverty reach and poverty impact

3 3 2 Poverty reach

One of the strong assertions made about NGOs is their ability to reach the poor What do the studies conclude on this score? The Norwegian study (Tvedt, 1995) argues strongly that there is no basis for arguing that NGOs are able to reach the poor effectively, though it also states (p 114) that the poorest appear to have been missed To some extent this is supported by a number of other studies (the Dutch, Danish, Finnish, Swedish and British studies) which argue that one of the weaknesses of many NGO interventions is their failure to undertake any rigorous analysis of socio-economic status with which to be able to draw firm conclusions about who is reached and how much their lives are changed by NGO projects In many cases however, this has not stopped them from making some comments on the issues of poverty reach and impacts on poverty

Most other studies are far more positive in one respect arguing that most of the projects have been focused on poor people (see for instance the two UK studies, the US studies, the Finnish and Swedish studies) [11] The Canadian study gave a score of 3 2 out of 4 for poverty reach though the study reports that NGOs attribute greater success to their own efforts (88 per cent) than do independent evaluators (71 per cent) (Fortin *et al* 1992 45) The US studies, in particular, go further than this Thus, the 1979 study states boldly that the poorest *are* reached [12] while the 1995 study repeats the assertion (rejected by the Norwegian study) that *PVOs have a comparative advantage in being able to work directly with the poor or with organisations that represent the poor than major donors can* (1995 22)

In sharp contrast, most other studies are critical, or at least more sceptical about the ability of the NGO projects examined to reach not the poor but the *poorest* Thus, the Danish study argues merely that the evidence on reaching the poorest is 'mixed', while the Zimbabwe case study produced for the Dutch study argues that the poorest are 'frequently missed' (de Graaf *et al* 1991) The Swedish study states that in three out of the four case studies the poorest were not reached The first UK study argues that many of the projects examined failed to reach the poorest However, this Study is of some additional interest as it explains how/why the poorest are reached either through rigorous targeting or through undertaking community-wide projects which include everyone in a geographical area Two studies (the Swedish and the Dutch) note the apparent reluctance of many NGOs to get involved with the urban poor, preferring work in rural areas, even though urban poverty is a growing problem

A few of the studies try to make comparisons about the ability of NGOs and official aid agencies to reach the poor With the exception of (all) the US studies, where comments are made they tend to challenge the quite widely-held view that NGOs have a better poverty reach Thus, the Danish study contends that one cannot say that NGOs are always better at reaching the poor than DANIDA, while the Zimbabwe case study undertaken for the Swedish study documents far from isolated cases where Sida has reached down to poor groups more successfully than some Swedish NGO projects

3 3 3 Impact on the poor

What was the impact of the projects examined on the poor? The studies reveal a wide range of conclusions Most positive is the second UK study Surr (1995) which argues that the projects

[11] There are exceptions one project in the Swedish study of Zimbabwe was targeted very much a middle class more affluent group of people

[12] This assertion is not based on evidence but simply on the fact that the NGOs worked in areas where the government did not

examined in general produced significant benefits for the poor' However, this study makes a point confirmed by others (such as the Indian case study for Swedish study) that the relative gains of the not-so poor were greater than for the poorest

In contrast, the first UK study argued that the gains to the poor tended to be minimal, though it went on to add that though the gains were small absolutely, they might be quite significant for those concerned, for instance enabling them to create the space to take further action to enhance their socio economic status in the future Likewise, the Swedish study notes that each of the four country case studies concludes that there is little evidence that the projects examined made much of a difference to poverty

Some studies have made distinctions on poverty status between types of projects Thus, the Finnish study of Uganda argued that social impact on the poor has been positive whereas the economic projects have had little impact Both the first UK's Zimbabwe case study and the EU study on integrated development projects stated that the impact on the lives of members of cooperatives has been particularly disappointing More positively, a number of the studies (the Finnish and Swedish) argued that impact has tended to be greater if projects are more sharply focused on a smaller number of objectives than if they are wide ranging

How do NGO projects compare with official aid projects in improving the lives of the poor? The synthesis studies did not find much hard evidence to answer this question, but one recent (Norwegian) study which has analysed the impact of official aid projects concluded forcefully that *the complete lack of any well founded studies* means that there is no real basis for making an assessment (Norbye and Ofstad 1994 xii) In other words, this selection of studies provides evidence which is certainly no worse, and in some cases better, than this assessment

An important set of issues discussed in the reports is the extent to which, if improvements in the socio-economic status of the poor (or the poorest) *do* occur, they are 'adequate' On this point there would appear to be unanimity among all the reports which address this issue that whatever good individual projects do, they are insufficient to enable the beneficiaries to escape from poverty The following comments from the earliest US study encapsulate this point well they have not been challenged and have often been confirmed (Barclay *et al* 1979 87) [13]

Even successful projects which PVOs have played a pivotal role are rarely total solutions They are likely to represent the thin end of a wedge introducing a process of developmental change that will require other complementary inputs from both inside and outside the beneficiary community

3 3 4 Expectations

Taking up in part the strong warning in the Norwegian study of the dangers of generalising the Swedish study argues that in some respects the whole NGO/poverty discussion is warped because of the unrealistic (and unachievable) expectations which have been raised about NGOs ability to address problems of poverty One sub theme of this warning is highlighted in the Bolivian case study and the Nicaraguan case study undertaken for the Finnish study Both argue that a major reason why the projects examined have had little impact on poverty is simply that poverty alleviation or reduction were not the objectives of the projects

[13] Thus the Finnish study argues that NGO projects cannot solve the problems of poverty

Another theme given prominence in the Swedish studies is the point that if one is serious about trying to solve the problems of poverty it is often necessary to look *beyond* the project Indeed, one issue taken up by the majority of the studies (and challenged by none) is the importance of looking at the wider context it is argued not merely that influences beyond the project often play a critical role in achieving impact but that NGOs tend to play down the importance of these influences [14] Indeed the Swedish study concludes that *Swedish NGOs which have engaged in or supported more politically relevant work have had impacts on poverty or have enhanced capacity within the popular sectors to have such impacts* (p 77)

More generally, the Swedish study argues that one of the reasons for which the impact on poverty has often been minimal, and usually less than expected, is that it is a common weakness of NGOs to fail to analyse the nature of poverty what it is what causes it and how to address it *The important point is that without a theory of poverty it is largely going to be a hit and miss affair as to whether a project will address poverty* (p 77)

3 4 Sustainability

Sustainability is an issue of increasing concern to donors and consistent with this trend, there has tended to be more emphasis on this issue in the more recent studies, though again the US studies have proved the exception as even the first (1979) study focused on sustainability However, while the earlier studies tended to focus mostly on the financial sustainability of projects more recent ones have placed increasing emphasis on institutional sustainability Additionally some studies, such as the Swedish one and the Finnish study of Ethiopia, have also discussed the issue of environmental sustainability

First a word on data quality Like the analysis of impact, discussion on financial sustainability, especially, has suffered from the overarching problem of the lack of quantitative data But the discussion on financial sustainability has been additionally hampered by the fact that most of the projects examined in this group of studies were still running As a result, the assessment of financial sustainability was commonly a look (projection) into the future based on current trends Some studies (such as Barclay *et al*) appeared to be very optimistic about the ability of projects currently unsustainable to achieve sustainability in the future

However, a more common view in these studies was that many projects are not sustainable and that one should not expect them to be in the short term The Dutch study makes this point as does the Swedish study, the first British study argues that few of the projects could survive on their own without donor support The Australian study is an exception here it states that there was a 69 per cent success rate in terms of sustainability [15] For its part, the Canadian study states that 52 per cent of projects needed additional inputs to survive and that 24 per cent has little chance of survival without external funding Finally in these overarching comments it is important to note that not all projects *are* executed with the intention of their being financially sustainable For instance, the Finnish study of Nepal assessed a leprosy hospital one of whose objectives whose to be funded continually by the (international) Leprosy Association

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[14] The first UK study makes the point that projects tend to perform best when the external environment is supportive and when the local economy is expanding The point being made is not merely the more superficial one that living standards among beneficiaries will tend to improve if the local economy is doing well but additionally and more importantly when trying to analyse the link between project inputs outputs and outcomes that the poor are often able to make (and hold on to) significant economic gains when richer people are also making gains

[15] Discussions with the authors suggest that this might be due to the fact that the issue was not examined in very great depth

However, perhaps more interesting are the refinements and qualifications evident in some of the studies The EU study of Ethiopia argued that water and agricultural projects were more likely to be sustainable, health and education projects less likely (Maxwell *et al*, 1996), the 1994 EU study on training centres concluding that none can operate without subsidies Some evidence is found to support the wider conclusions of the thematic studies (discussed in *Chapter 5* below) that credit and micro-finance projects have a good chance of achieving financial sustainability, though most evidence from these studies raises more questions than provides answers Thus, the first UK study failed to find evidence in the NGO projects examined of funding institutions being able to cover the recurrent costs of administering their schemes, while both the EU and Belgian studies on credit provide evidence of weaknesses the EU study of considerable failures and of high administrative costs especially in rural-based programmes (Dhonte *et al* 1994)

The evidence tends to suggest quite a strong contrast, if not contradiction, between, on the one hand, increasing demands by donors that funds will only be provided if projects are likely to achieve financial sustainability at least in the medium to long term,[16] and the evidence that many if not most projects have little chance of being financially sustainable It is in this context that one clear piece of evidence emerging from the studies needs to be placed It is that financial sustainability is less likely to occur for projects the majority of whose beneficiaries are very poor the less poor are the beneficiaries the greater the likelihood that it will be possible to recoup a larger share of the recurrent costs of running the projects Two policy conclusions arise from this If donors continue to insist that NGO projects will only be funded if they have a chance of achieving financial sustainability, then this will increase pressure on NGOs to veer away from helping the very poorest the Finnish study of Ethiopia states explicitly that this has happened If, however, donors wish to encourage NGOs to maintain, or even expand, their poverty focus, then either they must continue to demand financial sustainability and continue to turn a blind eye to much evidence which suggests this is an impossible demand, or else alter the demands they make to take account of the discrepancies between demands and practice [17]

The Swedish study is particularly interesting in this regard as the consultants were asked not merely to examine the issue of sustainability but to come up with a new definition of sustainability which attempted to address these tensions Box 3 2 summarises some of the main conclusions on sustainability drawn from this study

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[16] A recent example comes from the United States where the current strategic plan for the Office of Private and Voluntary Cooperation states that (OPVC 1996 51)

> *US PVOs and their local NGO partners are expected to focus their efforts on the establishment of service programs which are sustainable over the long term without continuous USAID support To this end PVC encourages its US–PVO partners to develop strategies and begin to demonstrate how they are increasing the non USAID share of resources that support their programs and those of their local NGO partners*

[17] The Finnish study highlights these tensions thus (p 139)

> *A number of the projects supported by the NGO Support Programme are better classified as welfare rather than as development projects they are* dominated *by aiming to meet immediate (and pressing) need often with little consideration given to different approaches Most of these welfare projects however have neither hope nor intention of finding a means of being self financing Many would argue that they should not even try to achieve such an objective Within a narrower context this is a quite defensible position However it cannot easily be reconciled with the stated objective of the NGO–SP that projects receiving its support should be self sustaining within as short a period as possible Even those projects that have more potential for self financing rarely achieve this objective within 3–5 years*

Box 3 2 Sustainability conclusions from the Swedish study

The sustainability of projects and programmes needs to be understood in terms of their financial components, their institutional components, their human resource components and their environmental components, without exclusive focus on any single element It is increasingly important to judge NGO projects and programmes within the context of their ability to stand on their own feet, in terms of achieving greater financial sustainability, in terms of achieving greater institutional sustainability, and in terms of their influence and impact on the environment Yet, there is an equally important need to focus all the time on quality of delivery and access, and to guard against an extreme view that those unable to utilise the market can be provided with basic needs, including productive needs, without the payment of any subsidy But sustainability also needs to be seen beyond the narrow confines of the discrete projects and programmes funded It must also include the notion of enhancing both the capacity of the executing NGO or agency and, ultimately, the capacity of the direct beneficiaries to take more control of their own lives and their development

All NGO projects and programmes need to be drawn up with a view to assessing the extent to which they should attempt to achieve financial and institutional sustainability, wherever possible within a explicit time-table and in relation to the direct and indirect impact they will have on the environment This assessment will need to include reviewing the concrete steps that need to be taken in order to increase the likelihood that an appropriate level of benefits will continue to be delivered for an extended period of time after major financial, managerial, and technical assistance has been withdrawn

Equally, however, the requirement to *review and assess* all initiatives funded against the achievement of sustainability does not necessarily mean that future financial or institutional sustainability should in all cases be a *necessary* requirement for funding discrete projects or programmes In particular, financial and institutional sustainability need to be pursued only on condition that, especially for the poor and where basic needs or services are being provided, the quality of and access to, the basic good or service provided will not be radically compromised Where the good or service provided is considered essential to the basic well being of the beneficiaries and where alternative funding cannot be found, the inability to achieve either financial or institutional sustainability should not constitute an impediment to funding such NGO initiatives

Some of the studies try to isolate those factors which tend to enhance and which might impede project sustainability Thus the 1988 US study lists five factors which are likely to impede sustainability pressures for achieving quick results, inadequate attention to market forces, limited financial and human resources, limited organisational skills, and a humanist paternalism For its part the Danish study pinpoints three factors seen to enhance sustainability local participation, institution-building and proper evaluation procedures Like the US study, the Danish country study of Sierra Leone and the Kenya study for Sweden both argue that the presence of expatriates are often important impediments to achieving sustainability The Zimbabwe case study for the Swedish report argued that the financial sustainability is likely to be greater if the project holders place major emphasis on the issue if the beneficiaries are not among the poorest, and if they are very committed to the project in hand Finally, and importantly, where the studies discuss institutional and financial sustainability they commonly make a direct link between the two, arguing that financial sustainability is more likely to be achieved in cases where there is also a focus on trying to enhance the capacity of the NGO executing the project Thus, work to enhance institutional sustainability is likely to enhance financial sustainability

Finally, and echoing the discussion in §3 3, above, some of the studies (such as the Swedish report) emphasise the importance of context They point out that while there may well be very good reasons for seeking ways to encourage the financial sustainability of projects, it is always necessary to be aware of the dangers of viewing project sustainability in isolation In short, there is little merit in working to achieve and praise the sustainability of discrete projects if these remain islands of development out of touch with and not linked to the wider context

3 5 Cost-effectiveness

A consistent theme across the studies (at least those which address the issue) is that cost effectiveness is far from easy to assess (Danish study) because of lack of data (US, Dutch, UK, Finnish and Swedish studies) As a result, few studies provide detailed data linking together costs and benefits of the 28 studies undertaken by the two UK projects only one produced detailed quantitative data The Finnish and Swedish studies provide little assessment of costs and benefits

Nevertheless, some of the studies drew their own (more qualitatively based) judgements on the balance between costs and benefits When comments have been drawn, the dominant view was that for the majority of the projects examined, the benefits were deemed to have exceeded the costs outlaid Typical would be the first UK study which made some general comments thus in five of the projects, the benefits clearly exceeded the costs of achieving them In five others the objectives were achieved, but at a high cost of staffing and resources In the two projects which failed to meet their objectives the costs far exceeded the benefits For the remaining four projects, it was difficult to make precise judgments, either because the project was relatively new or because the data was insufficient

Most bullish is the Australian study where assessments by the NGOs themselves indicated that only 3 per cent judged their projects to have had costs which were excessive in relation to the benefits achieved However, this was one area where the independent assessors disagreed most often with NGO personnel though overall only two out of 25 projects were judged to have produced benefits insufficient in relation to the expenditure outlaid Uniquely, the first US study drew (generally adverse) comparisons between cost-effectiveness and sustainability, arguing that projects ranking high in terms of direct benefit/cost relations did not necessarily have high scores for benefit continuation or for benefit growth (1979 45)

Some of the studies made comparative comments about NGO and official aid projects in terms of cost-effectiveness Overall, the comments were favourable to NGOs though they tended to focus more on explaining why NGO projects were more cost effective than on providing evidence to confirm that they were! Thus, the Danish study stated that NGO projects were cheaper than Danida projects because professional staff were cheaper to hire a point confirmed in the Dutch study Additionally the Dutch study pointed to two other factors greater commitment to projects by NGOs and what was termed 'high involvement Some the Swedish country studies drew comparisons between the NGO projects examined and host government interventions in one case in Zimbabwe it was pointed out that an NGO project to provide clean water cost only one tenth a comparable government project The Danish study argued that one reason by NGOs were more cost effective was because their projects were smaller in scale and thus less vulnerable to making big mistakes For its part, the Dutch study concluded that multi sectoral programmes tended to be less cost-effective than single/smaller projects because of far lower overheads

What about comparisons with official aid programmes? According to the review of Norwegian official aid, it was not possible to analyse the cost effectiveness of 40 per cent of projects analysed and the study concluded that only 25 per cent were cost-effective (Norbye and Ofstad, 1994 58) The NGO data contained in these studies, crude and qualitatively though most of it is, certainly provides no worse a picture than this, and probably one that is far better

The studies made the point that cost benefit analysis appears novel to some NGOs, and that overall costs are usually higher than NGOs believe them to be For instance, the Dutch study concludes that most NGOs have no clear sight into the relationship between costs and benefits of what they undertake, and that interest in these matters is small and it is not appreciated when further questions are put on matters of costs and benefits While a number of studies suggested that NGOs needed to focus more on cost/benefit issues, little guidance was given or recommendations made about what should be done However, both the 1988 US and the Dutch studies advised against imposing a monolithic approach on all NGOs, insisting that the methods selected needed to be tempered to each PVO/NGO what was stressed was more for NGOs to undertake country-based effectiveness studies for themselves than for donors (or others) to impose methods on them

3 6 Innovation and flexibility

A strength attributed to NGOs involved in development is that they are characterised by flexibility Relatedly, NGO interventions are claimed to be innovative These characteristics were discussed in a number of the studies, though the US studies did not really address these issues What conclusions were drawn?

Not surprisingly, the Norwegian study cautions against making generalisations on NGOs' flexibility not least because organisations develop over time In strong contrast, the Canadian study argues that NGOs are generally innovative shown by their ability to apply original low-cost solutions and their ability to adapt, though few firm examples are provided The area under discussion was another of those, however, where NGOs tended to disagree quite markedly with the view of external assessors 92 per cent of NGO personnel rated NGOs high in relation to innovation but half the external assessors disagreed

Between these two more extreme positions, the first UK study maintained that over half (nine out of 16) of the projects examined contained some features which could be described as innovative, though no definitions of innovation were provided in the study and it was acknowledged that most innovations tended to consist of applying tried approaches to new (different) situations This was also a point raised in the Canadian study In general, the Finnish and Swedish studies are more critical the Finnish study argued that there was little evidence of innovation in the projects examined while the Swedish study argued that most NGO interventions tend to follow prevailing trends in development

However the view that most NGO development interventions tend not to be innovative itself needs to be put into context Thus the Swedish study provides a rich crop of examples of NGO interventions which were innovative, suggesting that not a few NGO interventions are innovative The innovations which were encountered included the development of sign languages for deaf people in Kenya, the creation of a written alphabet for indigenous people in Bolivia, the elaboration of therapies for mentally handicapped young people in India, and a new approach to providing clean water and sanitation at the village level in Zimbabwe A common feature of these examples was the manner in which they were all grounded in some form of participation with the beneficiaries As for the reasons for the innovations, the Zimbabwe country case study argued that a major contributory factor was the prior research which had been undertaken in other words the innovations did not 'just happen'

A final point to note is that two studies (the Danish and the Australian) expressed some concern about potential negative effects which donor funding of NGO development initiatives might have on their ability to innovate and be flexible Thus the Danish study argued that Danida funding already constrained innovation the Australian study that greater official aid funding would in future reduce NGOs ability to innovate

3 7 Replicability and scaling-up

The issues of potential replicability and the scaling up of NGO development initiatives did not feature very prominently in these donor studies, perhaps not surprisingly as they focused on discrete projects and not longer term and wider issues Many did not address these issues at all and the level of discussion was far more shallow and superficial than has been evident in some recent NGO and linked research initiatives (see Edwards and Hulme, 1992 and 1995) Five separate points are made, almost all of which are negative or pessimistic in tone Thus it is argued that

1 NGOs have a limited ability to scale up their development efforts (Australia)
2 Where scaling-up has occurred it has tended to lead to an acceleration of management problems because of a failure to adapt to the demands of a larger organisation (second UK study)
3 NGOs often have a poor record of replicability because NGOs have few links with other organisations (Swedish study)
4 NGOs have little intention of replicating their development activities and so replication tends to occur mostly by using the same approach in a different area without much assessment of whether this is necessarily a good thing (first UK study)

Fifth and finally, the earliest US study contends not merely that NGO development projects are not suited to replication but that in general they should not be replicated Thus it is argued that most projects were small and most would not be suited to massive duplication in terms of comparable size in numerous other communities The ones that work best and generate most impact tend to be well adapted to specific environments Furthermore they are often shaped and led by individuals with unusual if not unique qualities

> *recognising this it makes little sense to attempt a carbon copy of one project in a different setting This is equally true of attempts to introduce a multiplier factor increasing project inputs without allowing for the need to modify their content and relative weights* (1979 85)

3 8 Gender

With the exception of many of the US studies, the issue of gender features in all the studies examined Discussion tended predominantly to be based on qualitative assessments

Did the NGO projects examined lead to improvements for women? There seemed to be wide differences of opinion in relation both to improvements in living standards and to the more difficult task of enhancing the status of women in societies which discriminated against them Greatest unanimity of view related to what was predominantly seen as a large gap between a comparatively great expectation of what might have been achieved and what turned out to be more modest outcomes in practice This was the view of both the British studies the Swedish and the Canadian study

Most studies concluded that in spite of strong articulation of the need to incorporate a gender dimension into NGO development projects, the results have been extremely modest The Dutch study argued there was little hard evidence with which to draw firm conclusions Where successes were recorded they were most commonly found in relation to more immediate and tangible gains for women, what clearly was proving most difficult was to introduce schemes which had a positive and short term impact on the status of women living in societies and culture which were perceived to be discriminatory to them

Within this overall context the studies produced quite a wide range of assessments At one extreme was the Kenyan case study conducted as part of the Swedish report, this concluded that the results were

'impressive' going beyond the mere targeting of women Relatedly, the Australian study recorded 63 per cent of NGOs believing the results had had a 'very beneficial' impact on women In contrast, the Ethiopian/Finnish study (led by Finnish female evaluators) concluded that gender issues were 'severely neglected', while the Zimbabwe/UK study (also led by a female evaluator) judged that in some cases (perhaps by focusing on traditional activities) the projects tended to reinforce inequalities and this makes it more difficult to address wider issues, a conclusion also reached by the (male-led) Zimbabwe/Dutch study For their part, the (confidential) German studies tended to support this conclusion

The Danish and Australian studies examined the planning stages of projects The former concluded that there was very little evidence of incorporating gender issues into projects at the planning stages while the Australian study judged that in (only) 61 per cent of projects were women directly involved a number of NGOs deemed the issue to be 'not relevant' Yet the Australian Review Team concluded that in many cases projects had a positive impact on women despite their lack of involvement in project planning

3 9 Environmental impact

Like gender, the environment has evolved to become a prominent cross-cutting issue in development in the last decade and this has led a number of donor studies of NGO development impact to ask about environmental impact Like gender, too, it is an issue which NGOs are eager to state is important, in some cases central, to their developmental endeavours The majority of donor studies reviewed here addressed environmental issues, mostly asking questions (like the Australian study) about whether the projects examined protected and/or enhanced the environment In almost all cases while answers were provided there was little depth of analysis, the exceptions being in some of the country case studies

Five clusters of answers were given One (given in the Dutch study) maintained that environmental impact was satisfactory or (put more negatively) that *the NGO programmes do not seem to constitute an additional burden to the environment* (p 72) A second answer was that there was little environmental analysis undertaken (at any stage of the project cycle), not least because environmental impact was considered largely irrelevant to the project(s) in question However, thirdly, some studies (for example the Canadian and the Finnish ones) argued that a major reason why the environment was considered so 'lightly' by NGOs was not merely because of the marginal importance of the issue but both because an environmental assessment was not considered and because there was not sufficient knowledge about how to incorporate environmental factors into appraisal and monitoring The Kenya/Swedish study included two projects which had been established to respond to environmental degradation but even here no environmental impact assessment had been carried out (Sinclair and Abuom, 1995 35)

This leads to the fourth type of evidence which was that, largely because of this ignorance, evidence was found of projects which had a negative effect on the environment but which had not been sufficiently noticed by the project implementers an income generating project in rural Zimbabwe (in the Swedish study) burnt firewood from a depleted forest without much thought about replenishment However, these environmentally worrying projects constituted a minority (two out of 19 in the Dutch project) and largely because the projects were small the environmental damage was minimal

Fifth and finally, however, the studies did find examples of projects (again a small minority) which were exemplary in terms of environmental analysis or environmental impact, for instance dam construction in Zimbabwe as documented in the Swedish case study

3 10 Democracy and pluralism

Even more recently than concern with gender and environmental issues has been donor interest in democracy issues However, even in post-1992 studies, by no means all studies have included an attempt to assess NGO development projects in relation to democratic benchmarks and civil society strengthening the Swedish study included an attempt, the Australian study did not Thus, the issue is only addressed by a minority of studies the Dutch, Canadian Swedish and Norwegian studies

The Dutch study aptly sums up the extent and depth of knowledge to emerge from the studies as a whole that NGOs have a positive commitment to the issues, that the impact is modest, but that there is little hard evidence and no indicators with which to judge progress or performance The Canadian study argues that NGOs do help to strengthen civil society but that an in depth study is needed to analyse this in more depth For its part, the Norwegian study maintains more sceptically that there is no evidence that as a group NGOs further democracy or pluralism

Moving from the general to the particular, and in strong contrast, a number of the country case studies maintain quite strongly that NGO projects which have been put in place specifically to encourage the democratic process or to challenge undemocratic features of society and the polity have been remarkably successful Examples would be the Nicaragua/Finnish study, the Bolivia/Swedish study and, more recently, the EC's special programme on South Africa (SPM Consultants, 1996) However, the latter study illustrates the wider difficulty of assessing the contribution of this particular programme to the wider objectives Little concrete evidence is provided to support the conclusion that *there is a consensus amongst all the people involved that it has had a significant positive impact on political development in the country* (1996 39) [18]

3 11 Factors contributing to project success and failures

For some (donors and NGOs), an understanding of those factors which contribute to project success and which impede project performance are often seen as equally, if not more, important than simply analysing impact This is because recording what has happened is viewed as mere history, trying to analyse why things happened is seen is some guide to enhancing future performance What is particularly interesting about this group of donor-commissioned studies is not merely that many of the studies are packed with views about those factors deemed to be important for achieving success in development or responsible for failure, but an eagerness to attribute reasons for differing performance contrasts sharply with a general reluctance to provide a firm view on impact The purpose of this section is to summarise the more general factors seen as important influences on impact, lack of space prevents a fuller discussion of different types of intervention or different sub sectors [19]

There are many different ways in which it might be possible to gather the information contained in the ten donor studies in order to identify the different factors said to contribute to project and programme success For the purposes of this synthesis the simplest approach was chosen namely to produce a list of the different factors which the different studies deem to be important and count the frequency with which these different factors are mentioned

Before the analysis is presented it is important to note that the studies are not consistent in relation to the prominence they each give to seeking explanations of differing performance Thus, some studies, most

[18] These sorts of issues are discussed more fully in the Chilean case study to this Report see *Appendix 11*

[19] These issues are discussed further in Chapter 5

notably some of the United States studies, place *major* emphasis on trying to understand and seek answers to differing performance Others – examples would be the Canadian and Norwegian studies – devote little space to identifying specific causes for differing performance Most of the rest are more open ended drawing attention to and discussing different issues if they are deemed to be important Hence, it should be noted that the 'scores' recorded are not necessarily a wholly accurate guide to all possible factors influencing performance they thus need to be viewed within this context

Box 3 3 provides a listing of 15 different factors which the reports record as the specific factors mainly responsible for NGO development interventions performing well or performing badly These 15 factors are sub divided into three clusters The first cluster consists of eight factors which are mentioned in more than three donor studies The second cluster consists of just one factor which was mentioned in two donor studies, and the third cluster comprises the remaining six factors which are only mentioned in one study The next few paragraphs discuss these in turn

3 11 1 External factors and links outside the project

The first of the two most frequently occurring factors attributable to project success relates to factors outside the project Two sorts of issues are mentioned here The first is the context or setting of the development project or programme A number of more specific factors are mentioned as elements which will contribute to project success These are the country in which the project is located, the overall level of development, and the level of development of the beneficiaries, the region in which the project or programme is located, and the general development background, most particularly whether the area, region or economy in which the NGO project or programme is located is expanding and growing or contracting Thus, the Australian study identifies the lack of a strategic perspective as a weak reason for failure while the Swedish study argues that insufficient attention is often placed on thinking strategically and realistically about the development opportunities in the areas where the NGOs work, adding that (p 95)

> *one of the most critical factors in determining the outcome of the project is the context within which it is being implemented and in particular the extent to which the project is coherent and relevant within that particular context Projects that do not build on processes of economic and social activity and change that are already underway nor on priority concerns of the people with whom the project is ostensibly working stand less chance of making much of an impact far less a sustained impact*

Two related conclusions can be drawn from highlighting these external influences on project performance The first is that one should be careful about comparing the performance of NGO development projects in different geographical locations, and in different socio economic and political settings, and even in different time periods The second is that the fact that external factors are so influential clearly provides insufficient information with which to draw overarching policy conclusions For example, that fact that it is more difficult, more costly and less easy to provide clean water to villages in hilly Nepal than it is in south India is unlikely to lead to the conclusion that villagers in Nepal should not be helped

Box 3 3 The factors contributing to or impeding success of NGO development projects or programmes

	Name of factor	Frequency no of donor studies
	Cluster A mentioned in three or more donor studies	
1=	External factors and links outside the project	7
1=	Competent/professional staff	7
3	Involvement of the beneficiaries / responding to local need	6
4=	Overall vision	5
4=	Good project design and good planning	5
4=	Institutional capacity adequate management, finance and administration and local capacity	5
7	The sector	4
8	Knowledge of other experiences/ documentation and research/the ability to network	3
	Cluster B mentioned in at least two donor studies	
9	Sufficient funds	2
	Cluster C mentioned in only one donor study	
10	The ability to stay small	1
11	Sufficient time to achieve objectives	1
12	The heterogeneity of different NGO interventions	1
13	Religious/membership or other affiliation	1
14	Deciding not to replicate	1
15	In-country presence	1

The second contextual factor of importance concerns the links which the NGO establishes with institutions and organisations beyond the project or programme boundaries What needs to be noted here is that these links can affect the project in many ways they might enhance overall and longer term impact, but equally they might hinder performance Thus it is argued that poor project performance can arise if the NGO fails to make contact with relevant government officials, other NGOs or other donors working sometimes with the same beneficiaries but at least within the same locality Relatedly, the Uganda/Finland study records an instant where one project (manufacturing and selling cement tiles) was seemingly successful because the project beneficiaries were the main purchasers of the tiles, but sales dropped markedly when the project met, and failed to compete with, the external market However, the studies also cite instances where links made with individuals and institutions outside the project impeded rather than enhanced project performance This was because these linkages restricted the ability of the project to challenge the prevailing power structures

3 11 2 Competent, professional staff

The second of the two most frequently occurring factors attributable to project success relates to the skills of the people in the organisation executing the project or programme The point made is self evident it is very difficult to implement a project without the necessary skills and by implication the more complex the intervention being attempted the greater is the need to ensure that the staff are adequately qualified The Canadian study argued that the quality and competence of the NGO staff were *the* key to success, more common was reference to staff 'motivation' which the studies confirmed tended to be far stronger than in government departments

However, there are some linked implications which need to be noted The first is that when NGO project failure occurs, this has not infrequently been associated with organisations switching from emergency to development work without adequate skills or sufficient training Second, and relatedly, project failure has been associated with generalist NGOs trying their hand at a number of activities without adequate training Thirdly, as NGOs (and donors) have become increasingly aware of both the complexity of the development process and the importance of beneficiary participation (see below) the range of skills necessary has tended to expand and become more demanding of both individuals and of organisations

3 11 3 Involvement of the beneficiaries and responding to local need

The importance of involving the beneficiaries and responding to local needs is high on the list of attributes for successful development intervention mentioned by NGOs [20] It is therefore, of interest to note the importance given to this factor by the donor-commissioned studies At one level the policy implications are simple and clear become involved in development programmes which are responding to clearly articulated local need and which involve the beneficiaries, not least because such projects are far more likely to be sustainable

However, the studies are less clear in outlining precisely how the beneficiaries ought to be involved, that is, the nature of their involvement and the intensity of it Part of the reason for this imprecision would appear to lie in the gap between donor studies which conclude that the beneficiaries need to be involved in projects and some quite strident criticism of NGOs because of failures in relation to participation Thus, the Danish study argues that NGOs are no better than official aid agencies in establishing 'real participation' (p 191), the Finnish study that there was really no evidence of

[20] See *Chapter 4* below

beneficiary participation in the pre-project phase, the Swedish study that the extent of participation was 'disappointing', with the rhetoric commonly exceeding the reality and 'little or no evidence of community based planning' (p 80) Indeed, the Nepal/Finland study and India/Sweden country studies found evidence of top-down non-participatory projects and an attitude of paternalism (we know best) among some implementing NGOs Nonetheless, it is also important to point to examples of extensive participation leading to significant successes, such as the UBV project discussed in the Bolivia/Sweden case study

What is also interesting is that some of the donor studies appear critical, or questioning, of too much participation Thus most of the Nepal and Indian projects criticised for their non-participatory nature appear to have at least a satisfactory impact Relatedly, the Swedish study argues that a form of partnership with a local organisation which involved it making all the decisions would be far from ideal and that if Swedish NGOs expressed their views more strongly, the quality of projects could well increase (p 82) Equally, the second UK study argues that however great the degree of participation in a project, if the project management is poor and the external circumstances unfavourable, no amount of participation will overcome these constraints (Surr, 1995 29)

A final, and important, point which needs to be highlighted was the extent to which the term participation was used, and usually referred to in positive terms, without much discussion – in many cases no discussion – of what beneficiary participation precisely meant It is certainly odd that so much stress should be laid on a factor whose meaning was often quite obscure

3 11 4 Overall vision

A cluster of closely linked factors are included under the term 'overall vision' Thus it is argued (in the first US study for instance) that NGOs which have a clear view of their purpose and how it might be achieved tend to perform better than those which do not, not least because they are likely to spend more time on pre-project planning Equally, the Dutch study argues that NGOs which focus on a small number of specific tasks or issues tend to perform better than NGOs with a wider remit, while the Swedish study appeals for greater coherence in projects and project design Similarly the Canadian study identifies too broad objectives as a key weakness of many projects the external assessors judged that less than half (43 per cent) the NGOs were clearly focused on what they did and had a clear mission statement

3 11 5 Project design and good overall planning

In many ways vision and narrow focus are linked to the importance placed on project design and planning Major weaknesses of projects can often be traced back to poor design projects put together hurriedly or even to projects commencing which should either have not been implemented or ought to have been implemented in different ways The Danish study refers to the lack of capacity in project preparation as a *most* urgent problem Clearly this point also links in to the issue of participation a feature of most of the studies (Finnish the first UK study, the Dutch, Australian European Commission and Swedish studies) has been the failure of NGOs to discuss potential projects with beneficiaries This array of weaknesses at the planning stages led the first UK, the Dutch and the Finnish studies to propose that more funds at the pre-project/appraisal stage should be made available to address these weaknesses

3 11 6 Institutional capacity adequate management, finance and administration and local capacity

Linked to the need to think clearly about what to do, and the importance of having staff competent to execute projects comes the institutional capacity of the organisation executing the project Thus, it is not surprising that the studies place emphasis on the need to ensure that there is sufficient ability to manage and administer projects and ensure that funds are used efficiently these issues are stressed in the two UK studies, most of the United States studies, the Canadian, Danish and the Australian study For instance, the Canadian study identifies limited management competence as one of four key weaknesses The Zimbabwe/Norwegian study pinpoints weaknesses in what is termed second tier management personnel (Moyo, 1994)

As noted above (§3 1), institutional capacity building is increasingly considered not merely a factor influencing the success of individual projects – stronger capacity leading to more successful projects and weaker capacity contributing to poorer project outcomes – but has been held out as an objective of NGO development assistance However, the studies reviewed provide little firm and consistent evidence across donor countries of the main characteristics of institutions which are important beyond the labelling of issues of importance such as management, administration and finance A more focused exception is a United States study, *Accelerating Institutional Development* (Bureau for Food For Peace and Voluntary Assistance, 1989) This notes that analysis of institutional development is highly complex, though it feels able to list the following attributes which were repeatedly present in stronger affiliate organisations (p 2)

- charismatic leadership and the ability to attract and retain good senior staff,
- a community base for support,
- a communication and connections network, nationally and internationally,
- an institutional vision, goals, strategies, coupled with a flexible management information system,
- a diversified portfolio of financial sources of income

The Canadian study also mentions the importance of community based support However, what is perhaps most interesting about the Canadian study is the extent to which it challenges the increasingly popular view that northern NGOs are eager to involve themselves in capacity-building initiatives It both challenges the view and argues that NGOs are not particularly good at it though providing little firm data to support the conclusions drawn (page vii)

> *the contribution Canadian NGOs make toward reinforcing institutional capabilities of their southern partners is small In fact NGOP (the NGO programme) is not designed to do so many Canadian NGOs are incapable or hesitant to undertake institutional development programmes aimed at their southern partners In many instances Canadian NGOs have indicated it was not their policy to provide this type of support or said they did not have the resources to do so*

3 11 7 The sector

A number of studies suggest that success is more likely to occur with NGO projects in particular sectors or sub sectors Most broadly, the studies suggest that the likelihood of success is likely to be stronger in sectors in which NGOs have had longest experience, frequently pinpointed as the social sectors, with specific mention made of education and health projects Poor marks are received for NGO projects involving integrated rural development projects, not least because of their complexities projects with cooperatives and training projects Income generating projects tended to score well in terms of raising incomes, and extremely poorly when the benefits were assessed

against the often substantial costs outlaid Credit and micro finance work scored well when executed by specialised groups, though repayment problems occurred here especially with young and experienced staff However, it was also far from uncommon for exceptions to be cited to these broad trends

3 11 8 Knowledge, research and networking

Three studies – the Danish and the first UK and Swedish studies – argue that performance will be likely to be enhanced to the extent that NGOs are aware of the successes and failure of other NGOs and that they have the funds and capacity to undertake or learn from recent or ongoing research These two points are linked to networking the relative isolation of NGOs and lack of knowledge due to relative and absolute isolation is pinpointed as significant causes of project weaknesses

Relatedly, a number of studies (such as the Finnish and Swedish) discuss the linkages and networks established, or in most cases not established, between NGOs and donor agencies The Swedish study in particular argues that mutual ignorance by both NGOs and donors about the development work of the other means that potential gains and synergies are constantly missed and overlooked

3 11 9 Sufficient funds

As noted in Box 3 3, two donor studies mention a shortage of funds as an impediment to further project success Thus both the Dutch and the first UK study argue that an absolute shortage of funds can and sometimes does impede impact, implying that if donors were (cautiously) to provide additional funds in some circumstances this would enhance impact In the case of the Dutch study, specific mention is made of the need to increase organisational costs

3 11 10 The ability to stay small

Uniquely, the first United States study (Barclay *et al*) argues that NGO successes in development are linked to the small size and scale of their activities It contends that growth reduces the flexibility of NGOs which it is assumed is a necessary ingredient for success A more common view is that when they grow, NGOs need to ensure that they have the institutional capacity to implement more and/or larger projects

3 11 11 Other factors raised by studies of one donor

Five other factors are mentioned by different donors The Danish study argues that often project failure is due to the shortage of time given to achieve project objectives It also maintains that one of the reasons for NGO successes lies in the heterogeneity of NGOs which increases the likelihood of a better fit between development needs and an NGO able to meet that need Two of the Swedish country studies argue that religious affiliation and/or membership of a particular grouping such as a trade union can often be factors which contribute to success of projects although the point is argued negatively More specifically, it is stated that common membership or religious affiliation especially between northern and southern NGOs adds an additional layer of binding helping to maintain links if or when relationships become strained

Finally the first US study argues against replication thus *reproducing carbon copies of successful small PVO projects is not a realistic option nor a defensible use of scarce human and material resources Equally important it will not produce comparable impact in most of the new settings where it is attempted* (1979 6)

Photo USO Women

4

THE COUNTRY AND DONOR CASE STUDIES

4 1 Introduction

As noted earlier donor-commissioned evaluations constitute only a part of the total number of evaluation and linked studies which help to throw light on the impact of NGO development interventions The accompanying volume to this Report – and over three times as long as this Report – provides a wealth of data and information on the impact and methods used in a sample of 12 different countries beyond these donor commissioned studies The major purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of what the 13 country and donor case studies tell us about the impact of NGO development interventions In some cases, the information contained in these studies is supplemented by data and comment from studies undertaken beyond this literature Before these summaries are presented we draw attention to some of the major areas where there is either agreement or an indication of some differences between the findings from the country and donor case studies and the findings of the donor commissioned studies discussed in Chapter 3 above

The predominant impression gained from reviewing the donor/country case studies is the degiee of consistency and overlap between the donor commissioned and other studies in terms of impact and reasons for successes and failures There is also considerable agreement about the gaps that need to be filled and current weaknesses not least in relation to enhancing institutional and capacity-building initiatives The following provide some of the main examples of these common themes

- Many of the reports are of varying quality with fewer in-depth studies Most would appear to be light on analysis light on rigour and light on explanations for how the conclusions were drawn Yet in contrast, some are outstandingly good

- As with the donor commissioned studies there is a paucity of detailed information provided on impact not least because of data inadequacies

- The donor/country studies tend to confirm the view that NGOs seem to be more successful when implementing social projects delivering services and considerably less successful when moving into the economic sphere Relatedly generalist NGOs tend to be poorer at more technical interventions than specialist ones linked especially to staff competence generalist NGOs with sufficiently qualified staff do achieve similar impacts The Belgian French and Chilean studies focus on these issues confirming the conclusions of an influential in depth study by Thomas Carroll (1992)

- Trade-offs between poverty and sustainability are generally confirmed

- The lack of poverty analysis is generally confirmed with some notable exceptions arising in Bangladesh

- The paucity of data on cost-effectiveness is strongly confirmed

- Credit studies reviewed are probably less optimistic than the thrust of the donor-commissioned studies at least than the USAID studies While poverty reach is generally seen as good especially for women, there are clear exceptions confirmed by a recent study by the Asian Development Bank

(1994) Weaknesses highlighted include high administrative costs and possibly firmer evidence to suggest a trade-off between poverty reach and financial sustainability

- The studies confirm the importance of the wider context in influencing project outcome, also supporting a view expressed in Carroll's study (1992) The Bangladesh and Brazilian studies argue for an extremely wide contextual assessment, while the UK study quotes one major study as arguing that insufficient attention is still given to the external context A major international study on NGO involvement in sustainable agricultural development maintains that NGOs have to try to influence government policy if they wish to have a significant influence on income levels (Farrington *et al* 1993)

- The importance attached to, but often the lack of information about, precisely how to enhance the institutional strength and capacity of implementing organisations is generally confirmed Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that NGOs are often more self critical than donors in relation to work in this area

In addition to the confirmation of these conclusions, the donor/country case studies provide a number of new ideas, or give a different prominence or emphasis to themes and perspective contained in the donor commissioned studies The following summarise these main areas and issues

- A number of the country studies (Kenya Norway, the Netherlands and the UK) argue that NGOs tend to be more critical than donor-commissioned studies not so much in assessing impact but in highlighting weaknesses or down playing strengths of NGO development interventions This is largely to be explained by the fact that historically NGO evaluations have tended to take place for operational purposes, so there is usually a greater imperative to address deficiencies in order to enhance future impact rather than simply to report results 'for the sake of it'

- Relatedly, it is apparent that a major reason why evaluations (especially those known about by donors) are commissioned is that current contracts are expiring and/or projects are entering into a new phase Yet a growing number of NGOs expect evaluations to lead to improvements in impact and in their capacities to intervene

- A number of the country studies state that it is often difficult to get hold of evaluation studies An important general reason for this is that for many NGOs there has been little imperative to bring them all together, itself an indicator of the absence of a *general* learning use of evaluations In some cases, too, there was a reluctance to share what were perceived as internal evaluations with people outside the organisation This reluctance, however, was more common in some countries (Britain) than in others – and not even an issue in others (such as Norway) where there is a strong tradition of openness The evidence from the south was more mixed

- The French study raises an issue not seen in the donor commissioned studies in relation to financial sustainability Thus, it is argued that often beneficiaries are not interested in financial sustainability as it is in their interest to seek to maintain the flow of external funds for as long as funders are willing to provide them

- Another comment made in the French study is that one needs to be wary of too readily assuming that impact should be judged in relation to improvement in living standards especially in the case of very poor rural people This is because poor people are usually more interested in risk minimisation than in income maximisation

- The donor/country case study evidence would appear to give more prominence to the importance of NGO leadership as a factor influencing project success than do the donor commissioned studies The difference is probably one more of degree than anything else thus donor studies often group the issue of leadership with management, whereas it would appear more common for NGOs to focus on leadership as a distinct and different attribute influencing project outcome

- The Bangladesh study observes a major difference between many southern evaluations and those commissioned from the north in terms of the time spent evaluating As southern evaluations tend to be longer processes, it is argued, and supported by evidence from Bangladesh, they tend to be more substantive studies

- Another (more perverse) finding is that the country studies would appear to give less prominence to networking and learning from others as a factor influencing project outcome than many of the donor-commissioned studies However, the issue is not entirely absent it is mentioned in both the United States and Kenyan studies It may be that the issue is considered so obviously important that its absence should not be assessed as an omission at all

- The roles of groups such as F3E in France (a joint initiative of the French Ministry and several leading NGOs) and REMAPP in Britain need to be highlighted as important focuses for promoting interest in and sharing information on impact and methods

- Finally, there is strong evidence in a number of countries largely northern countries, of growing interest by NGOs in undertaking synthesis studies in order to learn more about impact What is different with donor commissioned studies is that NGOs appear to be keener to learn from what their current and past studies have said about impact, donors keener to commission new studies However, while NGOs are certainly willing to share the results of their own synthesis and thematic studies with other NGOs, there is little evidence to suggest NGOs are willing to share their discrete project evaluation studies even with other NGOs

4 2 France, Belgium and the European Commission

Though these three studies used a range of material with which to try to form judgements on impact, lack of time and an inability to assess the representativeness of the sample of studies examined caution against making wider generalisations beyond the projects and programmes reviewed The French study estimates that in the past five years some 500 evaluations have been commissioned While a number of thematic studies have been carried out which might have had the potential for deriving firm conclusions, there have been serious problems with the quality of a number of these, providing another reason to be wary about the conclusions drawn A particularly striking feature of the studies undertaken, notably the French ones is the lack of any significant action taken as a result of the analyses undertaken or recommendations made In general and consistent with other donor and country case studies, the reports examined are exceptionally weak in coming to firm judgement about impact, not least because of the lack of data with which to form judgements Though greater attention is given to efficiency and effectiveness than to impact their focus is mostly within an accountability, rather than a development perspective

The interests of both NGOs and donors in evaluation processes is illustrated by the creation in France in the 1990s of a trust fund, F3E, co-financed by the French Government and NGOs to promote assessment and assessment methods across larger and smaller NGOs, and by the agreement between the Belgian Government and the NGO umbrella organisation jointly to commission evaluations The case of the *Foundation de France* needs to be mentioned as well as several years ago this organisation began an initiative to encourage evaluation in the south, directly under the control of southern NGOs

The following points summarise the main conclusions drawn in relation to particular themes and issues raised in the donor commissioned studies

- While some studies analyse projects through the prism of their poverty reach, the overriding conclusion is that very few NGOs undertake any analysis to determine which groups are poor and whether the project beneficiaries are among the poorest It remains, still, the *assumption* that the NGOs are working with the poor Some evidence indicates that wealthier groups are being assisted, though not even these would be termed 'rich'

- The studies tend to confirm the wider view that NGO interventions are more successful when focusing on social service provision and least successful when attempting to promote economic and more productive type projects While income-generating projects are usually successful in terms of creating additional income, there is often a sense that the project costs were considerably in excess of the income gains resulting

- This cluster of reports throw an interesting light on the linked issues of risk, poverty and the rise in socio economic status Specifically, the reports suggest that it is frequently wrong to judge the impact of projects for poor people in high risk areas on the basis of tangible and quantitatively observable improvements in their living standards This is because the poor people themselves have a far greater interest in the reduction and thus diversification of risk rather than in income maximisation This confirms the views expressed in some of the donor commissioned studies such as the UK/Zimbabwe and UK/Bangladesh studies (see Muir, 1992 and White, 1991)

- Thematic studies on (rural) credit have been produced by both Belgium and the European Commission Overall, the results are disappointing especially in terms of financial and institutional sustainability, notwithstanding the increase in the incomes of some which have often resulted Reasons for failure include a lack of skills of those running the programmes, poor management within implementing agencies and too high expectations that sustainable results in terms of maintaining increased income levels could be achieved in only a few years

- Beyond credit programmes, this group of studies confirms the wider view that NGOs are faced with a trade off between choosing to work for poorer groups or choosing to introduce a project which has a greater chance of being financially sustainable Relatedly, and confirming the view of the Swedish donor commissioned study, it is argued that projects have little chance of being financially sustainable unless the issue of such sustainability is addressed right at the outset – at appraisal A final issue raised in relation to financial sustainability concerns a potential and not infrequently a real, tension between the beneficiaries and the implementing agency and funder Thus, while it may be the desire of the funder to achieve medium to long term financial sustainability, this is often not the aim of the beneficiaries Especially if the NGO is providing funds over and above the level received by non beneficiaries in the locality, a priority for the beneficiaries is often not to seek to *reduce* their financial dependence on outside funders, but rather to try to *maintain* (and capture) the flow of 'surplus funds for as long as possible

- The studies include critical comments on the impact and effectiveness of institutional building initiatives providing evidence to conclude that sometimes there remains a gulf between the intensity of the arguments made by northern NGOs that capacity building is important and the need to encourage it and their abilities to achieve tangible gains Yet it must be made clear that the evaluations providing these types of comments are from 1993 or earlier, analysing programmes and projects from the late 1980s At this time, NGO initiatives in relation to capacity-building were relatively new This raises a more general point about this, and other sorts of synthesis studies they

risk giving too static a picture and not providing sufficient understanding of processes and change, not least in relation to innovative practices

- Finally, the studies address the issue of participation They suggest that there is a large gap between a strong verbal commitment to the principles of participation and what happens on the ground

4 3 Finland

There exists little in depth experience in Finland in the field of NGO evaluation, notwithstanding efforts by both the Department for International Development Cooperation and KEPA (the Service Centre for Development Cooperation – Finnish Volunteer Service FVS) to encourage activities, and a number of initiatives taken by large and a few small NGOs However, there is considerable eagerness to know more about different kinds of NGO evaluations The future is likely to see an expansion of NGO-initiated evaluation studies

There are no accurate data on the number of NGO evaluations that have been carried One reason is that the term evaluation' is used to encompass activities ranging from internal auditing to more rigorous assessments done by independent, external evaluators There seems to be growing tendency to make greater use of external, mostly local, evaluators However for smaller projects, of which there are many informal 'evaluations' are more common, often using unpaid, voluntary, evaluators, notably students As for the projects themselves there has been a tendency for Finnish NGOs to spread out beyond their initial focus, for instance from tree planting to income generating activities

The more significant evaluations usually examine projects in relation to efficiency, effectiveness, impact, sustainability, and gender, but in many cases the approach appears rather vague Cost effectiveness issues are seldom addressed Perhaps most surprisingly, there does not seem to be much focus on poverty (reach and impact), but this is probably because it is taken for granted that NGO development activities help those who are poorer Local evaluators, especially women, have frequently been employed in evaluations

The impact of Finnish NGO development interventions are broadly consistent with those of other donor and NGO studies However, the small scale of many of the projects is probably one reason why the issue of cultural impact is often given prominence Additionally, there appears to be a feeling that evaluations should not be carried out at project completion it is argued that if they are carried out earlier they would have a more positive impact on performance Some (critical) conclusions have come as a shock, not least because they raise questions about the quality and relevance of voluntary work undertaken especially in small NGOs The evidence suggests that small organisations are innovative in their approaches and open to suggestions both to change project thrust or to change ways of assessing projects There is considerable discussion in Finland on evaluation methods and practices, going on in a context in which it is keenly felt that approaches for small and large projects and NGOs need to be very different

4 4 Norway and the Netherlands

The case studies from Norway and the Netherlands provide clear evidence of a rapid expansion in the numbers of NGO-initiated studies The total number of new evaluation and linked reports produced over the last few years in each country may come to between four and five hundred The number for all NGO related reports produced over the last 10 to 15 years is unknown but the investigation points to a much higher figure than expected However the quality of the reports varies enormously a large group are often brief and of varying quality, and should not really be called evaluation reports at all On the other hand, an increasing number of reports are of high quality, prepared by competent international and national experts As with the donor-commissioned studies, the orientation of most reports is strongly

coloured by the perspective of the evaluation team It is often difficult to trace and follow through the consequences of the evaluation process notably how the reports are used and linked to project improvement and policy development

Another feature of the review of the Dutch and Norwegian studies is the growing diversity in the *different types* of evaluations Stand alone project evaluations are increasingly carried out locally by southern NGOs with financial support from northern partners, leaving northern NGOs to focus increasingly on broader evaluations of thematic or geographic (country) reviews addressing policy and strategic issues

Within the time limits of this study, it proved impossible to review and synthesise trends and issues from this large and expanding number of reports The works cited in the annexes to these two country case studies (Appendices 5 and 6) represent only a fraction of all the different reports and documents made available to the study In these two countries, all reports are in principle available and often listed in their respective Annual Reports, but the NGOs do not have databases or libraries where reports can be accessed easily The Dutch NGOs have many more technical and financial resources available for their studies and evaluations compared to their Norwegian colleagues All the Dutch co financing agencies (CFAs) have separate evaluation units and staff, none of the Norwegian NGOs has a special evaluation capacity

The following points summarise the main conclusions drawn in relation to particular themes and issues raised in the donor commissioned studies

- NGOs in these two countries have been both reactive and proactive vis a vis messages from their funding ministry They have reacted and adjusted to demands for evaluation and new types of evaluations (impact assessment) and there have usually been few differences between official and NGO approaches in terms of addressing issues such as gender participation, environment and sustainability

- The large 'grey' literature often focuses on managerial issues (finances, organisation, leadership), paying less attention to technical, policy and strategic issues Leadership is often highlighted as an important factor contributing to success, and this is itself often linked to a discussion of potential tensions between democratic and autocratic leadership styles, and the religious/cultural context in which projects and partners are situated

- The reports surveyed tend to be more process than impact oriented, providing more accurate descriptive information when it comes to implementation processes A frequent complaint is simply the lack of information with which to measure and assess impact Most reports are descriptive in nature, focusing on activities undertaken and outputs achieved, with few if any rigorous assessments of impact

- Nevertheless, and consistent with the thrust of most donor commissioned studies, the Norwegian and Dutch studies reviewed provide a relatively positive assessment of achievements and impact, with two qualifications First, the assessments are admittedly subjective and impressionistic based largely on interviews with project participants, project managers, and local experts' Secondly, the success described is usually the success of the implementation process and immediate outcomes and not a rigorous assessment of the long term effects and impact of development efforts

- Most reports produced are mid term or end of-contract evaluations frequently undertaken not to assess impact *per se* but to provide justification for project extension or a renewal of the contract

- Where the issue of sustainability is addressed, problems in terms of achieving both financial and institutional sustainability are readily acknowledged – particularly in relation to the poorest groups of society and in the least developed countries

- The studies also suggest that NGOs are fully aware of the importance of contextual factors influencing project performance with most providing detailed information and critical analysis of the external environment's influence on projects, and how these factors impede and/or support successful project implementation

- While most of the evaluation reports do address the issue of beneficiary participation, many are noticeably self critical This is generally the case, too for other cross-cutting issues such as gender the environment and human rights

- An increasing number of NGOs, more in Norway than in the Netherlands, have switched their focus to institutional development objectives as a central thrust However, thus far there are very few, if any, evaluations which assess the results of capacity building or new partnership alliances Nonetheless, a number of key institutional development and partnership evaluations are now in preparation in both countries

4 5 The United Kingdom

The country case study argues that UK NGO evaluation studies are of extremely *varying quality* Indeed, most UK NGOs would probably agree with the conclusions of recent synthesis studies commissioned by leading UK NGOs that most are of poor quality and thus do not provide an adequate database with which to attempt to draw conclusions about development impact One reason for this is simply that a number of these studies were not undertaken with this (broad) purpose in mind many will have been commissioned to help answer particular, and often more narrow, questions Relatedly the bulk of evaluation studies' are not impact studies at all predominantly they tend to focus on describing the actual or intended outputs of development projects

Overall, UK NGO studies tend to confirm the conclusions of the first UK donor commissioned studies Thus, many NGOs do not differentiate between beneficiaries, though they find it difficult and more expensive to reach poorer people, gender analysis and impact is weak and little attention is paid to environmental assessment, very few of the projects are likely to be either institutionally or financially sustainable if unaided by the sponsoring NGOs Additionally, UK work in terms of institutional strengthening would appear to be having only limited impact

The following points summarise the main conclusions drawn in relation to particular themes and issues raised in the donor-commissioned studies

- Many studies undertaken by British NGOs for their own purposes which have tried to analyse issues of impact have frequently tended to be harsher in their judgements of what have been achieved (impact) than donor initiated studies

- UK NGO studies not only suggest that the wider context in which projects are placed is important to impact but (confirming the ODA/NGO study conclusions) assert that NGOs are very vulnerable to the environment in which they work and to external influences Influences beyond the immediate project (the external environment) are not only very influential in determining impact but they tend to be underestimated by the NGOs concerned

- Project management was also found to be critically important to success indeed that strategic planning needs to be considerably improved A specific management problem seemed to occur when NGOs tried to scale up their activities

- In relation to participation, one synthesis study shows a clear change over the past 10 years towards a more flexible and innovative process approach to project design, involving project participants at each stage to maximise project impact Yet it is also suggested that the term participation is widely used without sufficient attention paid to its precise meaning, even if interestingly, it has been argued in a few studies that increased participation increased project costs One synthesis study argued that participation with the beneficiaries was a clear factor in project success though where projects fail, no amount of participation will overcome weak project management or a hostile external environment

- Many NGO studies tend to acknowledge difficulties in terms of achieving both institutional and financial sustainability In particular, they highlight what is often a very real conflict between trying to enhance the financial sustainability of development projects and reaching down to the poorer groups in society Doubts in the donor studies about difficulties of reaching the poorest groups and the lack of attention to gender issues appear to be confirmed by UK NGOs' own studies

- The British NGO studies confirm the need to devote considerable time and resources to project (or programme) preparation with intended beneficiaries

- The importance of NGO leadership effective management related to the size of the organisation and development programme, and staff competent and skilled in the intricacies of the project being promoted are all confirmed as important factors contributing to project success Some evidence supports the view that specialised NGOs are better at achieving impact than many generalist NGOs, but it is rather sketchy

- The view, propounded most strongly in USAID literature, that project impact is critically related to the attributes of the organisation (NGO) implementing the project is also confirmed

- A number of British NGO studies are self critical in terms of participation they also point to major weaknesses in terms of participation at pre appraisal and appraisal stage, and participation in evaluation often appears to be more a wish than common practice

- In relation to credit programmes, the evidence from one UK synthesis study suggests that the NGO credit programmes evaluated are extremely costly to administer with running costs rising to as high as 30 per cent of loans disbursed Additionally default rates were also high, averaging 40 per cent The evidence from a second synthesis study concludes that it is *not* possible to come to firm conclusions about the activities financed by credit because very little information is collected on them

4 6 The United States

In order to synthesise data on impact a total of 54 evaluation reports, 27 commissioned by USAID and 27 by members of the PVO community, and other related materials, were reviewed This country case study found that the number of evaluations that provide an assessment of the impact that PVO interventions have had on the lives and livelihoods of beneficiaries is currently sparse due to the absence of baselines and inadequate monitoring arrangements Where impact was assessed it was frequently found to be impressionistic, based on the judgements of external 'experts' rather than on rigorous

analysis However, more rigorous studies were found particularly in the area of Child Survival and Microenterprise giving a clear indication of the beneficial impact of PVO interventions

Thus there is evidence that PVO Child Survival interventions can succeed in significantly reducing child mortality in selected developing countries within a three to six year period More impressionistic data support this claim indicating that a number of PVOs have monitored substantial reductions in mortality and morbidity in project areas during the lifetime of their interventions However the case study found that there is a need to develop consensus over the definition of impact and the importance of its measurement before USAID and the PVO community will be able to report on impact across the range of interventions within the Child Survival sector

On the whole increases in income output and the value of fixed assets could be attributed to PVO microenterprise interventions However changes in employment were found to be negligible absorbed by family members or existing employees Household income assets and consumption were also found to increase due to microenterprise initiatives although evidence of the sustainability of these improvements and subsequent reductions in vulnerability remains illusive Improvements in women s well-being have also been documented in response to credit initiatives however serious questions remain over women s control over loans and the income derived from them

Synthesis reports suggest that there is a broad consensus amongst evaluators with regard to the major determinants of project and programme success These were the active participation of communities throughout the project cycle particularly over project design the use of appropriate technology that has a proven demand partnership with existing local institutions flexibility in project design and implementation and high quality staff and project management The absence of these factors plus an insufficient analysis of the needs and priorities of beneficiaries as well as inadequate monitoring arrangements were found to be characteristics of those projects and programmes that faced difficulties in achieving their objectives

The case study also found that evaluation reports are not the only source of impact data on PVO interventions in the United States There are increasing numbers of research papers that provide a rich source of material on the intended and unintended impact of PVO interventions

The study concluded that evaluations commissioned by either USAID or PVOs have not systematically addressed cross-cutting issues such as poverty gender participation and cost-effectiveness It has been individual evaluation teams that have determined whether these issues are analysed in any depth Indeed *ex post* evaluations were found to be particularly rare limiting analysis for example of sustainability to that of prediction The absence of guidelines regarding methodology key issues and terminology has led to inconsistency and considerable variation in the quality of analysis Moreover this piecemeal approach has constrained organisations from undertaking comparative studies in order to improve the quality of programme design and inform policy development

4 7 Bangladesh and Brazil

Two major themes emerged from the Brazilian and Bangladesh case studies The first concerned context not least the wider agenda and aims of many NGO initiatives which extend well beyond a focus on the socio-economic needs of discrete groups of beneficiaries The second concerned discussion of precisely how one measures impact

In both countries NGOs have been extensively involved in development issues for decades They have seen their role as strong advocates for a democratic civil society consequently they view the replacement

of authoritarian regimes by democratically elected governments as events for which they can claim some merit indeed a number would argue that this is one of the greatest indicators of their impact Advocacy for democracy and against social exclusion continues to be a central plank of NGO initiatives in both countries, particularly in Brazil, where a prominent role of NGOs focuses on support and advice activities to local organisations However, it is very difficult to find firm evidence of the impact that NGOs in Bangladesh and Brazil have had in their current work of helping to strengthen democratic organisations and processes

Traditional methods and tools of evaluation are not felt to be adequate to assess the impact of these types of interventions, and of linked initiatives focusing on influencing public policy Consequently, new methodologies and indicators are being sought Indeed, the discussion is often far wider then merely looking for specific indicators to assess discrete activities debate has broadened to look for ways of incorporating not merely the nature of particular interventions, but the whole cultural, socio-economic and political complexity of the local reality NGOs express concern with the very term impact and its usage What does the concept really imply, how is it used and how does it influence activities? What is the time perspective to use in assessing impact, the Brazilian NGOs ask? They point to the need to distinguish between evaluation and impact assessment, and highlight the need to go beyond merely the measurement of quantified results using only standardised methods

While NGOs in Bangladesh have also a strong advocacy role, they are more involved in socio economic (including income generating) activities than Brazilian NGOs These provide greater opportunities to try to obtain data on impact than for interventions focusing on concientisation, empowerment and mobilisation The largest NGOs in Bangladesh have their own, often huge, research and evaluation departments, staffed with qualified professionals This enables them to build knowledge of the programme area and the changing socio economic status of the beneficiaries However, it is not only these larger NGOs which have a record of undertaking rigorous studies middle sized NGOs, too, carry out studies and evaluations of their interventions within the limits of resources they have

The following points summarise the main conclusions drawn in relation to particular themes and issues raised in the donor commissioned studies

- The locally initiated impact assessments and studies reviewed for this study reveal a high concentration and focus on credit programmes, poverty impact and the empowerment of women Wider policy issues and sustainability are also addressed to a more limited extent, while cost effectiveness innovation and flexibility and replicability are either not addressed or else raised rather haphazardly

- A major difference of these analyses compared with evaluations initiated by donors or northern NGO evaluations has been the time factor, leading often to far more rigorous and in-depth analysis Relatedly some of the most ambitious impact assessments have been undertaken by local NGOs

- The evidence tends to support the view that NGO programmes are having a positive impact in terms of improvements in socio economic status increased incomes, greater employment opportunities more household assets, a reduction of vulnerability What is also important is that these studies provide strong evidence of an ability to reach the poor, and even the poorest, often female headed households Nonetheless, these positive results are not universal across all NGOs and all projects

- The studies point to significant improvements in the status and material well being of women Participation in decision making is also considered to have been enhanced as a direct result of NGO

interventions However, no evidence was found of significant changes in gender roles occurring or of structural factors which contribute to gender inequalities being challenged

- Though Bangladesh has been praised for a number of its major credit programmes, the evidence reviewed suggested that the impact of NGO credit programmes on the institutional sustainability of village and group organisations with whom the NGOs are working was found to be quite limited, as were the wider impacts of these programmes

4 8 Chile

What is known about NGO impact in Chile? At one level, relatively little As evaluations explicitly concerned with impact assessment have been few in number, key informant assessments and more academic forms of research provide some of the most insightful sources of information on impact

One area in which NGOs are often deemed to have had an impact was the political arena in the period of dictatorship NGOs' own work and the international and national networks they helped build were important in ensuring that democracy was restored Additionally, NGOs provided livelihoods and homes for people who were active not only in resistance, but in piecing together agendas for the democratic-government-to be ' This, though indirect, is an important impact

In the period since democracy it has been far harder for NGOs to define a clear role for themselves, and difficult for many of them to adapt to contemporary development challenges As the emphasis has shifted from resistance and democratisation to challenges such as poverty alleviation and environmental sustainability, many NGOs have found themselves less well equipped in the necessary skills Those with clear technical specialities have perhaps had greater impacts on policy thinking and on poor people's livelihoods environmental NGOs, agro ecology NGOs and so on But in general, as NGOs have been drawn to financial services, enterprise formation among the popular sectors, marketing, etc , their impact has probably been limited (though again information is scarce)

The public sector is one arena in which there is an emerging body of information about NGO impact, and a body that will almost certainly grow in the coming years While these public programmes that work via contracted intermediaries have not evaluated NGOs separately from other intermediaries, those close to this monitoring and evaluation are able to draw certain informal conclusions about the performance of NGOs In general these conclusions emphasise the great diversity among NGOs as regards their quality and impact There is perhaps greatest impact in training/education/technical assistance, and in social and local development The results from the evaluation of the organisation INDAP, for instance, suggested positive farmer opinions about programme impact – a programme in which over 30 per cent of farmers are attended to by NGOs Opinions were positive among both women and men, even if they seemed greater among the middle peasantry rather than the poorest Interestingly similar results are emerging from a within NGO evaluation of the impact of NGO agricultural technical assistance in a micro region in the central–southern part of Chile Early results from that evaluation appears to show NGO impact on farm technology and productivity

If these have been the areas of greater impact, the sense from professionals in public programmes that deal with NGOs is that their impact has been far weaker in productive activities income generation and financial services This opinion is more or less consistent with that voiced by others in the NGO sector, as well as by financing agencies, consultants and evaluation experts

4 9 Kenya

A first conclusion from reading locally-initiated evaluations and reviews is that they appear to be strikingly more critical (self critical) of, if not the impact of their development initiatives, then of the difficulties they face A second is that Kenyan evaluations tend to share a lack of good data on impact with those of other countries, notwithstanding the fact that, against a dominant trend, evaluation studies have been going on in Kenya for many years A third conclusion from reading this set of reports is that though there is currently plenty of talk about participation and participatory methods, there is a paucity of evidence of participatory processes on the ground, though there is certainly evidence of what might even be termed an explosion of interest and expanded activity in participatory *appraisal* in Kenya

The following points summarise the main conclusions drawn in relation to particular themes and issues raised in the donor commissioned studies

- The extent to which Kenyan evaluations use the headings of donor commissioned studies – poverty impact, effectiveness sustainability, replicability, scaling up and innovation – varies greatly

- Take the issue of poverty on the one hand, many of the reports do not address the extent to which the poverty status of the beneficiaries has changed as a result of the intervention being assessed, on the other hand, many do highlight the difficulty and, importantly, the complexity of the problem Of some interest is a link drawn in some reports between progress made in enhancing livelihoods and innovations in methods tried and under experimentation

- No evidence was found of rigorous cost effectiveness analysis of projects, even though one Kenyan NGO had produced an impressive manual on the issue over 10 years ago The problem is often not a lack of willingness to try, but the inadequacy of the available data

- A common feature in many of the reports was the difficulties found and expressed in achieving long term sustainability of the projects being assessed Not surprisingly, many are pessimistic about achieving financial sustainability sufficient to ensure continuation of services (health and education) which have been dependent upon comparatively high levels of donor funds Perhaps of greater interest is the extent to which the issues of institutional sustainability are discussed and analysed, leading to a strong and quite widespread conclusion that NGOs need to devote far greater thought to ways of enhancing and strengthening the capacity of groups to manage development initiatives with less external support

- There is little evidence of cross-cutting themes such as gender or environmental issues featuring strongly in the evaluation studies reviewed However parallelling discussion on participatory approaches and especially participatory appraisal there is clearly growing concern with the gender dimension of NGO development initiatives What appear to be lacking most are tools with which to assess gender and environmental issues

- The Kenyan study reviewed some major studies on credit programmes There is evidence of the interplay of evaluation and research being fed back into and influencing approaches and methods There is also evidence from Kenya of difficulties experienced, and generally poorer impact performance when generalist NGOs have tried with limited skills and technical knowledge, to run credit and micro finance schemes often unaware of current thinking and lessons learnt in other countries Equally, Kenyan evidence highlights the problems associated with trying to promote small scale enterprise projects with very poor and inexperienced participants, and of sustainability problems arising from uncritically providing both financial and non financial services

- The Kenyan evidence tends to support the view that because locally initiated evaluations focus on smaller and more specific issues within a project they tend to lead to far more instances of post-evaluation follow up often enhancing future project impact than donor commissioned studies However some qualification to this generalisation is needed as a number of evaluations and studies reviewed especially those in the micro enterprise sector provided strong evidence of externally-initiated evaluations leading to altered directions and improved future impact

- The Kenyan study uniquely examined evaluation in a small community based organisation which produced some conclusions strongly at variance with those emerging from more orthodox/conventional approaches (see Box A12 3)

4 10 Senegal

NGOs have grown rapidly in recent years in regard to both numbers and the range of different activities undertaken totalling between 200 and 350 different organisations today Thus there are NGOs which fund other NGOs and smaller local organisations information research and advocacy NGOs intermediary NGOs and NGOs which provide a range of different services directly to beneficiaries As in other countries the target of NGO interventions is the poor though there is little evidence of rigorous analysis taking place to identify and isolate groups of poor people

While there have been international NGOs operating in Senegal for many years a recent development has been expanded contact with the United States This has been particularly influential in giving increased prominence and emphasis to three issues highlighted in the donor commissioned studies institutional and capacity-building initiatives sustainability questions and analysis of the impact of projects on the lives of the beneficiaries

Obtaining information on evaluations in Senegal is made particularly difficult for two reasons First, because there is no central database and second because of the problems of confidentiality of many of the studies undertaken There are two major centres where evaluation and linked studies are held CONGAD and USAID Unfortunately it was not possible to gain access to these though it is likely that the problems of inaccessibility will soon be at least partially resolved as there is a growing sense among NGOs of the need to tap into and build a database of current and past experiences Indeed CONGAD has recently decided to launch a study on the impact of development interventions Another recent development is the *Foundation de France* decision to begin to evaluate some 10 different development interventions though it is too early to begin to see the results of these studies Recent evaluation studies have generally been conducted by international and national consultants

A particularly important feature of contemporary discussion in Senegal is the emphasis increasingly being given to process-type evaluations building on the importance which has for long been given to participatory approaches

4 11 Concluding comment

As noted in the Introduction to this chapter these few pages have tried to summarise data and information on the impact of NGO development interventions contained in the 12 country studies Lack of space means that this summary is not able to capture the many examples of specific cases of NGO activities given in the accompanying study Those interested in reading about these concrete examples of NGO activities need to read the accompanying volume

Photo Kristian Runcberg

5

THEMATIC AND SECTORAL STUDIES OF IMPACT

5 1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on a number of thematic and sectoral studies which have assessed the impact of NGO development interventions As this literature is vast, it was decided to focus particularly on two areas child survival and micro enterprise programmes, areas of growing involvement of NGOs and growing interest to donors The chapter also looks briefly at capacity-building initiatives and the theme of partnership [1] Thus, what is presented here is far from comprehensive, although many of the issues raised by this material have already been discussed in Chapter 3 [2] One problem has been tracing and locating reports and studies This is a problem which has been faced by other studies For example, the study by Haley used in this chapter was based on 21 individual reports It took over six months simply to locate these (Haley, 1995)

One clear conclusion emerging from this review is that although impact is widely discussed, the precise meaning of the term is often not clear The terms efficiency, effectiveness (including cost effectiveness) and sustainability of development interventions are commonly used, but impact assessments of the child survival and micro enterprise programmes examined do not focus much on cross cutting issues such as gender, the environment and participation [3] However a number do focus on the broader context Data and information on innovativeness, replicability and scaling up are only rarely found

5 2 Donors, NGOs, themes and sectors

Most donor-commissioned NGO evaluation reports provide some information on particular themes and sectors The following three examples, from the United States, Australia and Finland, indicate the dominance of activities in social sectors Thus, almost 30 per cent of 274 USAID funded PVO and INGO projects covered by the General Audit Office (1995) included health and child survival activities Kershaw *et al* (1995) shows that half of the Australian NGO projects over 1988–1993 were undertaken in the social sectors, including health, education and social infrastructure (although expenditure on these projects amounted to only 32 per cent of the total) A smaller proportion of projects were undertaken in productive sectors, such as agriculture, fishing, forestry (8 per cent) and manufacturing, industry and commerce (2 per cent) The water supply and sanitation sector accounted for 6 per cent of projects In Finland in 1996 (Kehitys 1997), education and training accounted for 40 per cent of projects, health 33 per cent and other social services 6 per cent of projects funded The environmental projects accounted for 9 per cent of the total and agriculture and forestry 4 per cent [4] This distribution is confirmed by

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[1] For a discussion of NGOs and the seeds sector see Cromwell *et al* (1995) for a discussion of NGOs and agricultural research see Farrington *et al* (1993)

[2] Many projects are integrated development programmes containing different component parts resulting in highly complex evaluations See for instance Schoch Consulting (1995)

[3] There are exceptions Sebsted and Chen s review identified studies in which it is argued that gender is a key factor in understanding impact and the overwhelming conclusion is that gender does make a difference (1996 vii)

[4] The Department for International Development Cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Finland publishes an annual list of NGO development activities but this is not synthesised It classifies data by countries in which NGOs work Many other countries publish similar kinds of information usually omitting any statistical analysis

NGO data, for instance, from Denmark the Netherlands, the United States (CARE) and Bangladesh (see Husain 1995)

However, the situation is not static As illustrated by the example of DanChurchAid (DCA), the largest relief and development NGO in Denmark, many NGOs are going through a process of fundamentally rethinking not merely their sectoral involvement but the whole way they enter into and try to influence development change A number are moving away from a community development and a social delivery-focus towards a clearer political and humanitarian mandate, emphasising human rights, the strengthening of civil society and capacity-building, involving, too, rethinking the relationship with their partners

5 3 Child Survival Programs

In the United States, the PVO Child Survival Support Program works with organisations such as Africare, CARE, Catholic Relief Services, PLAN, Save the Children and World Vision Funded by USAID, the Program has recently been providing support to 72 Child Survival Projects in 28 countries The objective is to reduce infant mortality rates in USAID assisted countries from the 1985 average of 97 deaths per 1000 live births, to 75 deaths by the year 2000

Though there is a growing amount of data on impact (viewed broadly), much of this comes from discrete studies and analyses and often not from evaluation studies and reports – which is also true for data and information on micro enterprise programmes Thus, a study by Martin (1993) analysed USAID s Child Survival Program in six countries – Bolivia, Egypt, Haiti, Indonesia, Malawi and Morocco Programme performance was assessed in relation to effectiveness, impact sustainability and efficiency Here, impact was measured principally in relation to improvements in infant and child mortality and morbidity rates The study concluded that declines in infant mortality rates were attributable, in part to programme interventions These conclusions were based both on epidemiological studies and on the experiences of beneficiaries and providers in the field who were interviewed for the study [5] It goes on to argue that PVOs in the Child Survival Program are reducing mortality, improving nutritional status, lowering disease incidence, upgrading the quality of health worker practices, strengthening community resources, and empowering the community

Perhaps of greater interest is the conclusion that all these impacts are interrelated Where community building and strengthening occurs, it is argued that there is a high probability that the benefits achieved through project activity will be sustained, because the benefits are achieved through community efforts Relatedly, a study by Reynolds *et al* (1991) argues that demands for rapid health status improvements and the demand for sustainability may push projects in conflicting directions [6]

Sustainability remains a concern Martin's review argues that sometimes priority is given to supporting service delivery to the detriment of institutional strengthening, and particularly *financial sustainability* Overall, the data reviewed suggest that there is no easy way of achieving financial sustainability Even

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[5] The study notes the impact of Child Survival initiatives in relation to their contribution to sustainable economic development which in turn helps to create and expand markets for US businesses Child Survival programs help slow population growth contribute to increased economic productivity and help further stability by meeting basic needs

[6] The conference proceedings edited by Storms *et al* (1995) provide similar sorts of data but also provide some other perspectives on the role of PVOs/NGOs in Child Survival Programs Also in the United States the PVO Child Survival Support Program at The Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health has published several reports a detailed review of which would provide a more rounded picture of the Program and its impacts Regrettably it was only possible to access a selection of that material for this Study

relatively low cost primary health care technologies incur substantial recurrent costs if permanent universal coverage and acceptable quality of care are to be achieved, notwithstanding efficiency improvements, endowments and the possibility of raising some income through charging fees for services

Based on the findings of these US-based assessments, there appear to be three important roles for PVOs in Child Survival programmes Firstly, PVOs often seem to be effective in operations research' developing and testing alternative approaches, marrying the aims of lowering costs and improving services Secondly, PVOs are often able to mobilise additional resources for health care, sometimes complementing and supporting state child survival services Thirdly, PVOs can often achieve success in being primary providers of services This has occurred for example, in Haiti, where the state system has been unable to deliver services, leaving the way open for PVOs to provide health services to 30 per cent of the national population and 50 per cent of the rural population [7]

External evaluations provide evidence of some expansion into income generating activities, contributing to increased cost recovery mechanisms In 1991, only 3 per cent of completed projects involved community education and mobilisation as a strategy of sustainability, but by 1993, this had risen to 71 per cent of projects There is also evidence of increased involvement in institutional strengthening in an analysis of projects ending in 1994, 85 per cent were involved in counterpart training, with 58 per cent training counterparts in management skills There is also evidence of PVOs working to strengthen the capacity of communities to cope with emergencies, particularly in sub Saharan Africa Training is given to workers in local NGOs, and in government health systems, in the most inaccessible and under served areas of a country in simple life saving measures, such as oral rehydration therapy (ORT), sanitation and immunisation Methodologies learned in the Child Survival Program are being extended to other health projects sponsored by major PVOs

In order to compare the results of different studies, the one undertaken by Haley (1995, see Box 4 1) on Maternal and Child Health Projects Evaluations was assessed in relation to the study done by Cabrera (1995), who provided a synthesis of rural health programs involving water supply and sanitation projects The issues addressed were (in descending order of frequency) i) cost analysis, per project or per beneficiary, ii) effectiveness of the information, education and communication (IEC) methodologies, and iii) sustainability of benefits The three least common elements mentioned were i) effectiveness of counterpart relations, ii) community management and participation, and iii) effectiveness of health promoters Those elements that appeared less frequently in the evaluations reviewed were (in order of least frequency) i) baseline studies and implementation plans, ii) ethnic and gender relations, iii) impact of morbidity and mortality, iv) effectiveness of management, v) institutional strengthening, and vi) norms for design and construction Both reports lack standardised evaluation and reporting guidelines It is also apparent that recommendations contained in evaluation reports are not necessarily taken on board when designing new projects, or even integrated into ongoing projects following mid-term reviews Haley concludes that most evaluations tended to be extremely negative focusing on areas that needed improvement instead of discussing both the strengths and weaknesses of a project Where positive comments are made in evaluation reports these tended to come in the form of praise for PVO staff

[7] In the past ten years 145 million children under the age of five and 17 million women have benefitted from the Program Quantitative data from baseline and final surveys have documented strong consistent performance across PVOs and across regions At a cost to USAID of little more than $1 20 per beneficiary per year the Program is remarkably cost effective (http //ih1 sph jhu edu)

5 4 Microenterprise Innovation Projects

One of the areas where growing attention has been focused on monitoring, evaluation and learning methodologies, is microenterprise development USAID and the members of the US PVO community have been particularly active in this area This section focuses especially on material from USAID programmes [8]

The broad aims of these programmes are

- to assist the efforts of the poor, especially women, to increase their income and assets, thereby enhancing their overall welfare,
- to develop the labour and managerial skills of individuals often excluded from other development initiatives, thereby enhancing the capacity of the economy to grow, and
- to facilitate the growing and development of local organisations serving the microenterprise sector

A long held view has been that although microenterprise financing is an important development activity because it helps poor people, it cannot be financially viable because poor people have no funds to save and loans are too costly to administer Some recent evidence has tended to challenge this view For example, reviews by Fox (1995) and Malhotra (1995), argue that microfinance institutions *can* be self-sustaining and, indeed, *must* be self sustaining if they are to provide poor people access to financial services However, as discussed elsewhere in this Report, there have been a number of studies which have shown that many (and perhaps most in terms of numbers of projects) have failed to come close to achieving these objectives It is, thus clearly important to temper optimism based on some case studies and the *wish* to achieve greater financial sustainability with a hard nosed assessment of activities on the ground What is probably of more use than more studies which conclude that generalised approaches 'work' or 'do not work' is a careful analysis of those factors which contribute to success and failure, strengths and weaknesses

To identify 'best practices' the study by Christen *et al* (1995) – note this was *not an evaluation* – examined 11 microenterprise finance programmes in nine countries [9] The study examined performance from two perspectives *outreach* and *financial sustainability* Outreach refers to the central purpose of microenterprise finance of providing large numbers of poor people, including the very poor and women, with access to quality financial services Financial sustainability concerns the institutional capacity to become independent of donors or government subsidies The basic findings were that the most successful microenterprise finance institutions share four characteristics

- *they reach the very poor* clients are typically very small businesses that would otherwise be excluded from formal financial services, and programmes offering small loans tend to serve more women,

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[8] A number of USAID reports such as its Microenterprise Development Brief' are now accessible through the internet

[9] Programmes examined were Agence de Credit pour l Enterprise Privee (ACEP) of Senegal La Asociacion Dominicana para el Desarrollo de la Mujer (ADOPEM) of the Dominican Republic Banco Solidario S A (BancoSol) of Bolivia Badan Kredit Desa (BKD) of Indonesia the Unit Desa System of the Bank Rakyat Indonesia (BRI) Bankin Raya Karkara of CARE (BRK) of Niger Corporacion de Accion Solidaria (CorpoSol formerly Actuar/Bogota) of Colombia Fundación Integral Campesina (FINCA) of Costa Rica the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh Kenya Rural Enterprise Programme (K REP) and Lembagan Perkreditan Desas (LPDs) of Indonesia

- *they reach large numbers of clients* several institutions, notably in Bangladesh (reaching about 2 million very poor clients) and Indonesia (more than 2 million borrowers and 12 million savers), have achieved major coverage on a national scale It is scale, not exclusive focus, that determines whether significant outreach to the poorest will occur,

- *they grow rapidly* the key to this rapid growth has been the ability to maintain financial viability – controlling bad loans holding administrative costs to manageable levels, and developing a rapidly growing base of financial resources, and

- *they meet client needs and provide high quality services* dramatic annual growth in the number of borrowers, the loan portfolio, and, in some cases, savings deposits are evidence of strong client demand and overall satisfaction with the services received

Ten of the 11 institutions examined were operationally efficient, covering the cost of day-to day operations – salaries and other administrative costs – with programme revenues from interest and fees Five institutions were profitable programme revenues covered both the non financial operating costs and the financial costs of obtaining loanable funds on a commercial basis 'Fully self sufficient' programmes shared three characteristics they charge rates of interest high enough to cover all their costs, including costs of capital, fully adjusted for inflation, they have a mechanism, such as group lending, social pressure, or unconventional collateral, to keep loan defaults to a minimum, and they consciously aim to hold their unit costs to levels that can be sustained by financial market spread

Particularly interesting components of USAID's Microenterprise Innovation Project (MIP) are Assessing the Impact of Microenterprise Services (AIMS)[10] and Microenterprise Best Practices (MBP) [11] The AIMS Project is a multi-year effort designed for several purposes, one of which has been to produce statistically rigorous, cost effective and methodologically sound assessments of the impact of microenterprise programmes The AIMS Project also develops and tests monitoring and assessment tools for use by PVOs/NGOs to track and assess the impact of their microenterprise programmes The MBP is the research and learning component of the MIP the objective is to expand the knowledge base of microenterprise practitioners in developing countries 'Best Practice' is a constantly evolving body of knowledge – expanding day by day as practitioners try new approaches to the successful delivery of microenterprise services and learn from their successes and failures [12]

One aspect of USAID's work has been to focus on how microenterprise finance programmes should be evaluated (see Otero & Rhyne 1994) It is argued that it is important that evaluations be carried out at two broad levels, the client level and the institutional level The *client service perspective* evaluates programme clientele (for instance, which customers are 'good'), quality of service (what specific services clients want) and the impact on clients' choices and quality of life (what do clients do differently now

[10] The AIMS Project is being implemented by Management Systems International (prime contractor) the Harvard Institute for International Development the University of Missouri and the Small Enterprise Education and Promotion (SEEP) Network

[11] The MBP Project is implemented by Development Alternatives Inc (DAI) ACCION International Foundation for International Community Assistance (FINCA) Harvard Institute for International Development (HIID) International Management and Communications Corporation (IMCC) Ohio State University Rural Finance Program Opportunity International and the Small Enterprise Educational and Promotion (SEEP) Network

[12] The MBP contains 21 core research topics stemming from three main conceptual categories 1) financial services 2) non financial services and 3) the role of microenterprises in economic and social development

that they could not do without the service) The *institutional perspective* evaluates institutional self sufficiency, institutional financial status and institutional strength and context [13]

Outside USAID, other research has been conducted by Hulme and Mosley (1996) (see also Hulme & Helms, 1996) This concludes that at the level of economic and social impact all institutions studied had a positive impact on overall output, both directly and, in some cases, indirectly They also had generally positive effects on employment and technology but these varied in relation to income groups In particular it was found that poorer borrowers, being more rich averse, were disinclined to invest income from a successful project Additionally, they found that agricultural labourers in particular were not well represented even among borrowers and that these people still find it difficult to borrow from any source They also found little evidence that the schemes they examined increased the political leverage of poorer peoples Finally, and perhaps of greatest interest, they found at a particular point of time that there was a trade off both between and within schemes between the rate of poverty reduction and the rate of income increase, but that this trade-off can be shifted by measures which raise demand, reduce transaction costs or increase the degree of financial control possessed by lending organisations (1996 201) [14]

What are the implications of these findings? Firstly, that MFIs are likely to produce a higher average income impact by focusing their lending on borrowers just above the poverty line who demand promotional loans Secondly, appropriate institutional reforms to bring the micro finance institution in line with accepted best practice design features (cost recovery interest rates savings and insurance facilities, intensive collection of loan instalments and incentives to repay), may make it possible to increase poverty impact and financial viability at the same time

The recent study edited by Schneider (1997), though encompassing organisations beyond NGOs, also focused on sustainability and institutional development, but additionally addressed the complex issue of transaction costs (and how to reduce them) It found that it is far from easy to provide financial services for the poor which meet the dual challenges of sustainability and outreach, but highlighted, in particular, the importance attached to good management (1997 36) A strong conclusion of this study was that no single model works, and thus that there is still much to learn from analysing comparative performances and isolating the main factors (strengths and weaknesses) of different enterprises

One of the central issues of current debate is the extent to which it is possible to provide non financial services without financial support from outside Another central theme of the MBP research programme is the problem of sectoral linkages for instance what has microenterprise development to do with health, housing and environment? It is argued that microenterprises have an environmental role in protecting area conservation waste management and recycling, and energy conservation

In general, there is much optimism about microenterprise development, illustrated by the results and aims of the recent Summit on the subject However, as argued forcefully by Sebsted and Chen (1996 19), it is crucial that sweeping generalisations are not made, not least on the basis of optimistic assessments, the view that poor people are bankable is based on far firmer evidence than the view that financial

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[13] Neill *et al* (1995) discuss a framework for evaluating how microenterprise interventions contribute to household security enterprise stability and growth individual well being and the economic development of communities

[14] The idea is as follows higher income borrowers experience a greater income impact because they are willing to take risks and invest in new technology fixed capital and in hiring of labour for promotional activities Very poor borrowers tend to take out small subsistence protecting loans which do not tend to produce dramatic changes in borrower income and in some cases can even lower income possibilities *Promotion* is a better strategy than *protection*

institutions for the poor are institutionally sustainable The evidence from Kenya (see *Appendix 12*) suggests that there are many problems, and that there often is a trade-off between poverty and financial sustainability Additionally, many of the 13 BRAC studies (synthesized by Husain 1995) related to credit and savings programmes, discuss difficulties such as increases in overall indebtedness, relatively greater access of managing committee members to BRAC credit and weaknesses in credit management

Perhaps the most important conclusion to draw is that there are still many areas where neither evaluations nor research have yet provided firm answers to questions about impact, not least in relation to impact on households in general and women in particular

5 5 Capacity-building

A new growth area for NGOs is that of capacity and institution building This encompasses very many dimensions such as the relationship between northern and southern NGOs, or capacity assessments dealing with the workings of the northern NGOs' country offices Some northern NGO umbrella organisations have also assessed their capacities, as part of their policy work There are also reviews of country programmes [15]

One example of donor capacity assessments are studies carried out for Danida of the four largest Danish NGOs the Danish Red Cross, DanChurchAid, Ibis and the LO/LOFT Council According to the standard terms of reference for these assessments, the studies *shall provide Danida with an assessment of the organisation s overall professional and administrative capacity to manage all aspects of their development activities that are supported by Danida and of the organisation s overall comparative advantage relative to Danida s bilateral development cooperation* The criteria used for the organisation's capacity to support projects were

- *professional competence* is the organisation able to plan carry out and evaluate projects and project portfolios in a professional manner and live up to the standards set for administrating Danida funds?
- *relevance* is there sufficient linkage between critical development challenges and needs in developing countries, and the priorities set in the organisation's project activities and portfolio?
- *adequacy* do the organisation's activities have a scope that enable them to make a difference in meeting the relevant development needs in developing countries?
- *efficiency* are the organisation's activities at all levels implemented with the minimum use of necessary resources?
- *effectiveness* do the organisation s activities meet the immediate objectives set by it with the minimum use of necessary resources? Are these organized and designed to maximise their impact?

[15] One group of such studies undertaken by an NGO would be the studies commissioned by MS in Denmark Donors and different NGOs have done their own country profiles many of the report findings overlap

5 6 Shift towards new partnerships

Capacity assessments can be viewed as part of a wider movement to rethink relationships between organisations, not least in relation to the term 'partnership' For a number of NGOs, not least church based organisations, a rethink across the north of what NGOs might or ought to be doing is leading to a reassessment of themselves and the way they interact with organisations to whom they channel funds This in turn is leading to debate and discussion in the south about the nature of the relationship, contributing further elements to the evolving partnership debate, though there are also many instances of southern organisations focusing on their links with donors outside *northern initiated* processes of reflection

In the north changes and processes of reflection are taking place for instance with Danchurch Aid within the Lutheran World Service, which is reassessing its mandate and its mode of intervention, and CARE (Cooperative Aid for Refugees) the largest relief and development agency in the world For CARE, the focus has been on how it delivers services, and to whom and how it measures success, how its diverse programmes are integrated and how it raises money and builds support for its work New key approaches include focusing programmes on families and households, building effective local partnerships, enhancing advocacy initiatives, and integrating global operations [16]

The issue of partnership between northern and southern NGOs has not been addressed in much depth by evaluation studies However, a recent NGO initiative entitled *Discerning The Way Together* with components in both the north and south, tried to address the subject with some candour and thus provides one example of the increasingly important discussion taking place on the issue of partnership

For its part, the northern NGO report stated that there is clearly considerable unease at present across both northern and southern agencies about the relationship between the two groups and about the extent to which the concept of partnership should continue to be used and the ideals of partnership should continue to be pursued in practice The report suggested that the way forward lies in

- Acknowledging that relationships should be based on the fact that agencies have different interests and that some ideals of partnership are unlikely to be met in practice, especially those which challenge the integrity and autonomy of both the northern and southern agencies

- Recognising that northern agencies *need* in depth relationships with partners in the south, including the opportunity to debate northern and southern agencies' understanding of the context, objectives and hence funding of advocacy criteria

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[16] These examples from Denmark illustrate some of the re orientations being discussed
from easy countries and regions to more difficult politically sensitive countries and vulnerable regions
from large scale donor like projects to small scale development efforts designed and managed by branches in the operating national societies
from a project focus to comprehensive partner relationships integrating developing activities and institutional development
from merely using the branch structure and volunteers in operating national societies as vehicles for development efforts to developing partnerships between branches in the developed countries and branches in poor countries aiming at the promotion of democratic values and practices and the respect for human rights within the overall framework of civil societies
from welfare approach to empowerment and advocacy
from focusing on the physical aspects of disaster prevention to utilising the global coverage and the local presence of NGOs for building civil societies taking the branches in areas of tension as the point of departure
from separate operations to integration and programming for development

- Recognising that practical constraints restrict the number of southern partners with which a northern agency can have an in depth relationship Thus, some relationships must necessarily be more formal and limited in their scope

- Recognising that there are and will continue to be different relationships between different northern agencies and different partners, based on history, religious affiliation, cultural and country contexts

- Acknowledging that partnership has to include assessment of performance and subsequent reflection and feed-back

There were some sharp differences in viewpoint expressed in the southern response, *Discerning the Way Together Southern Perspectives*, not merely in terms of partnership but in terms of a vision' for the action of the agencies in the future Thus, it is argued that it is not enough for development intervention to be professional and efficient, but that development also requires people who are committed 'to justice, to structural change of the dominant political order, who are in solidarity with the poor and sensitive to other cultures' A new kind of development, where 'people's creativity is part of their resistance' will rely on the strengthening of civil society and democratisation of the cooperation processes

If current discussion within and between NGOs is a good guide, it seems that this discussion on partnership is poised to expand considerably in the months and years ahead

Box 5 1 Maternal and child health project evaluations in Latin America (1989–95)

Haley analysed 21 external and internal evaluations of 16 maternal and/or child health projects in seven Latin American countries The 14 key project components discussed were the following

- *community participation and management* seventeen of the 21 evaluations included discussions of community participation to some degree Two of the evaluations specifically stated that special effort needs be made to include women in all stages of project development One project included representative from the community as an active evaluation team member,
- *roles and effectiveness of community health workers (CHWs)* although 10 of the sixteen projects trained CHWs, very little was mentioned in the evaluations regarding their roles or effectiveness,
- *sensitivity of ethnic and gender considerations* nearly half the evaluations made no reference to issues regarding cultural or gender focused perspectives Four evaluations stated that project activities should target men as well as women in order to increase the overall acceptance of project activities within a community as a whole,
- 71% of the evaluations made no mention of *institutional strengthening* activities
- *partnership relations* were mentioned as an area for improvement in 11 evaluations,
- *effectiveness of interventions* this was a very difficult area to assess through the information presented in the evaluations – indicators of project effectiveness – were described almost solely in terms of knowledge change and reported behavioural changes Two evaluations recommended the inclusion of ex post evaluations in order to learn more about long-term impact and sustainability of specific interventions,
- there was very little mentioned of *effectiveness of information education and communication methodologies (IEC)*,
- there was very little analysis of data on *impact on morbidity and mortality* in the evaluation reports,
- over 50% of project evaluations did not include a detailed discussion of project *sustainability*, not a single evaluation mentioned the existence of a formalised plan to promote sustainability However there was discussion on the incorporation of income generating activities, strengthening of communities and the creation of an appropriate incentive structure as a means to sustainability
- over 80% of project evaluations made no mention of *advocacy or replicability of models*,
- the themes discussed regarding *appropriateness of project design* involved training, geographical location, needs assessments, supervision and monitoring, beneficiary selection, goals and personnel,
- *baseline studies and detailed implementation plans* there was very little specific information regarding collection of baseline data – one quarter made no reference whatsoever to a baseline study,
- *cost analysis* the majority of evaluations (76%) included little or no information regarding project costs Lack of systems of accounting implies that there is no way to determine if intervention strategies are cost effective,
- *project management* there was discussion on the decentralisation of the management structure the need to streamline data collection and the improvement upon project information systems as well as the issue of quality control and the increase of project supervision

Source Haley (1995)

Part C

SEARCHING FOR METHODS

Photo Kristian Runeberg

6

INTRODUCTION

Part C moves away from impact issues to focus on methods and approaches of assessing impact It is divided into two chapters Chapter 7 summarises the methodological approaches used in the donor-commissioned studies Chapter 8 looks at methodological issues beyond this narrow cluster of studies Most of this chapter summarises the information provided in the country studies, however it also makes reference to some additional literature, highlighting not merely interest in the issue of methods and methodologies but also the fact that this interest extends well beyond the confines of what NGOs themselves are doing both individually and in groups

There would appear to be six clusters of conclusions emerging from this discussion First, and as just noted, there is considerable interest across donors, NGOs and the wider research community in evaluation and evaluation methods Some ten years ago outside the United States (where there has been a far longer tradition of interest in, and practice of evaluation of PVO development initiatives) most interest in NGO evaluation was probably focused within the official donor community rather than within and among NGOs This has changed today there is widespread and growing interest in evaluation and evaluation methods among many NGOs and within the linked and wider research community

Secondly, however, there is far from unanimity about how to evaluate NGO development interventions In part, this can be traced directly back to two of the main conclusions arising from the discussion of impact that the impact of discrete projects is usually profoundly influenced by the wider context, and that development is an immensely complex process Thus uncertainty about impact and the relevance of its differing causes ripples through into uncertainties about methods of assessing it In part, too, as discussed most fully in Chapter 8, uncertainty about how to evaluate arises because NGOs are involved in a variety of different types of development intervention, many of which are ill-suited to more orthodox/traditional approaches Additionally, however, differing views about methods arise because of differing views about the ' why" of evaluation If the purpose of evaluation is to provide an ex post assessment of achievements to date, then the process of evaluating is likely to be different from evaluation whose purpose is to deepen understanding of what has happened in order to enhance future performance Together, these different factors and influences provide at least some of the explanations for the fact that there is both so much activity focused in trying to develop and use indicators (qualitative and quantitative) with which to judge impact, and so little evidence of a growing consensus on the appropriateness and use of more ' holistic" indicators

Thirdly and relatedly it would appear that there is probably as much if not more experimentation within the NGO and linked research community focusing on new and different evaluation methods than there is within the official donor community But this does not imply that it is only donors who need to learn from and listen to NGOs and not vice versa In particular it is apparent that a growing number of NGOs have seen merit in if not, in some cases, the necessity of addressing some of the mainstream issues which donor evaluations have long considered to be essential tools of evaluation the focus on achievement against objectives efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability But to the extent that these lessons/insights are being absorbed and to an increasing degree, accepted by NGOs – though there remains some *vigorous* criticism of the use/misuse of such approaches – interest and debate have moved on to the less tangible and quantitative aspects of evaluation, around which debate, discussion and research are now increasingly focused

The fourth conclusion is that both the debate and discussion of evaluation methods and experimentation tend to be focused predominantly on larger and more medium sized NGOs The evidence suggests that far more smaller NGOs and even CBOs *are* involved in evaluation especially different forms of self-evaluation, far more than one would suspect from reading documents housed in donor organisations or even within northern NGOs Yet they tend not to be involved in, or able to take part in and make use of many of the approaches being debated and discussed In part this is because of ignorance rooted in failures or gaps in communication but in part, it lies in an inappropriateness of methods for the smaller organisations Smaller NGOs often do not want to become involved in more complex and sophisticated methods because the time money and human resources required would often change the nature and size of the NGOs involved perhaps eroding the very attributes in which their (potential) successes are rooted not least their smallness and the flexibility this provides

Fifthly it would appear that in spite of much talk about partnerships – between donors and NGOs between northern and southern NGOs and between southern NGOs and CBOs – the closer one reaches down to the immediate beneficiaries at the grass roots the more vocal is the complaint that the flurry of activity in relation to evaluation and evaluation methods continues predominantly to be a top down externally driven exercise Large gaps remain both in relation to sharing written reports and discussing conclusions with beneficiaries Such gaps reinforce the view that those beyond view evaluation more as an audit to ensure that funds are well spent than a process dominated by the desire to learn in order to enhance future impact This is not only a complaint which northern NGOs make about donor-commissioned evaluations it would appear to be a complaint which southern NGOs make about northern NGO evaluations and which community based organisations make about southern intermediary NGOs

Sixthly and finally the evidence gathered confirms that one of the reasons why impact data on NGO development interventions are often so poor lies in the inadequate to non existent monitoring of project performance and the absence of any base line data against which to judge performance This leads to the important policy conclusion that in these cases it is insufficient to focus solely on evaluation methods and techniques if one is trying either to improve impact or to learn more about impact it is **necessary** to focus on the wider issues and gaps in planning appraisal and monitoring

7

METHODS AND APPROACHES IN DONOR-COMMISSIONED STUDIES

7 1 Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to summarise the main methodological approaches used in the ten donor studies whose views on impact were summarised in Chapter 3 The studies not only shared a common purpose – to assess the development impact of NGO interventions funded, in part, by donor funds – but most shared a common broad approach This entailed selecting a sample of projects to examine across a number of countries, undertaking country and project visits which involved discussions with a range of stake-holders, analysing data and writing up reports In most cases, the projects chosen for examination were not based on a random cross section selection, but rather on mutual agreement between evaluators, which effectively meant that NGOs had a (potential) veto on what would be evaluated, leading to an (acknowledged) bias in favour of projects perceived to be more successful In most, but not all cases, discussions took place with the beneficiaries Many of the studies (the Australian, Canadian, Danish, Dutch, Finnish and Swedish) also involved the gathering of data and information beyond the confines of the smaller number of projects selected for closer scrutiny, often through sending out questionnaires, supplemented by interviews

Though broadly sharing a common approach, the detailed methods used varied from study to study, often quite markedly, though it is possible to group the studies into three clusters The first group consists of a small number of studies which used the least rigorous approaches methods are loose and open ended, or not discussed in any depth in the respective studies They would include the main Norwegian study, whose focus lay far more in discussing macro-level issues and the wider historical context rather than the impact of specific or small groups of development interventions, the New Zealand studies and the Finnish study of NGO projects in Tanzania

The second group encompasses the majority of donors' studies the Australian, Canadian, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, Swedish and UK studies [1] What all these studies have in common are methods of evaluation rooted in wider OECD approaches to evaluation, examining and assessing impact in relation to the four major building blocks of more orthodox aid evaluation relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability Additionally, however, most of these studies have also assessed impact in relation to two cross cutting issues, gender and environmental impact, as well as in relation to some of the core attributes which NGO development interventions are assumed to have, most notably poverty reach and impact innovation and flexibility and replicability Another common theme running through this group of donor studies has been the attempt to assess capacities and capabilities of the organisations implementing the projects examined In most cases this meant an assessment of management and administration and in some cases a wider assessment of institutional characteristics

Some of this particular cluster of studies have tried to assess impact in relation to additional criteria Thus the Australian study tried to assess impact in relation to the appropriateness of the technology used, while the Swedish and Danish studies viewed the projects and programmes through the prism of democracy and/or human rights issues Additionally some of the studies (the Canadian, Danish and

[1] The (confidential) German studies would be included within this cluster

Swedish studies) not only tried to assess the development impact of the projects examined, they also assessed the projects in relation to the extent to which they were in accordance with the overall principles or purposes of the respective official aid programmes A number of these studies – the British, Dutch, Finnish and Swedish studies – tried to look at impact within a country context, commonly asking what difference the funded NGO projects and programmes of the respective donors made to the development problems of the country taken as a whole

Third and finally come the European Commission and United States studies The Commission's studies are difficult to classify because the methods and approach tend to differ from study to study In contrast, the United States' studies all share with the second (majority) group an approach which attempts a high degree of rigour and one which focuses on the core questions donor evaluations try to address relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability However they differ from this group and are put very much in a category on their own for two reasons The first is that they generally have not tried to assess NGO development interventions in relation to cross cutting issues (gender, the environment and democracy/ human rights issues) But, most importantly they stand out as studies which not merely have tried to make assessments against particular indicators but, as illustrated in §7 2 below they have made use of different clusters of indicators with which to assess impact

Overall one of the most important reasons why studies have adopted different approaches would appear to originate in the terms of reference (TOR) given, in most cases these have been extremely detailed The (confidential) German studies have been the most notable exception here, providing more open ended TOR asking for comprehensive assessments with regard to all relevant aspects of development policy In contrast to the differences outlined, almost all the studies *share* three characteristics Firstly, the TOR set the scene for anticipating exceedingly high expectations of what can be achieved, particularly what can be said about development impact In quite sharp contrast, the tone of the conclusions is usually cautious and tentative, arguing that it is difficult to come to firm and decisive conclusions because of extreme time constraints, limited funds and the paucity of hard data This lack of either quantitative or even much verifiable data is clearly extensive and deep-seated it is mentioned in all the more rigorous studies, encompassing a lack of base line data, a lack of monitoring and a lack of data with which to compare project performance or beneficiary impact For example, while most of the studies pinpoint the issue of cost-effectiveness and stress its importance, they point to data inadequacies which prevent rigorous and objective assessment being made in almost all cases benefits are not rigorously assessed, in many cases cost data is not collected Quantitative data inadequacies led to most evaluations focusing on more qualitative data, though it is important to add that most of the studies stressed the importance of using qualitative approaches, not just because of the absence of quantitative data but because the development interventions examined could not be assessed comprehensively without such an assessment, *regardless of the quality of the quantitative data available* Almost all studies made some comments about the inability to come to firm conclusions because of lack of time, or lack of funds to undertake more rigorous analysis – or both Most of the second group of studies were commissioned with the intention (or hope) that the conclusions drawn from a sample of projects selected would provide the basis for making generalisations beyond these particular projects Yet most of the studies caution against making such generalisations

The second characteristic shared by the donor commissioned studies is that while most of them describe in detail the specific factors against which they assess impact, they provide very little detail about precisely *how* they arrive at the judgements made Thirdly, and relatedly, where the studies do address the issue of how they come to judgement, most refer to the role and importance of *personal* judgement The Australian study was unique in expressing concern about this arguing that 'greater emphasis was placed on professional judgement and unverified data than is desirable for full-scale project evaluations (page B6) The upshot is that, by and large, and with the exception of the first American study and, in

some respects, the first British study, these donor-commissioned studies provide far less in the way of detailed methodological insights than might be inferred from the extensive comments and judgements made on impact while the better studies list the factors against which judgements are made, there is a paucity of information detailing how these judgements were made More specifically the donor commissioned studies do *not* advance knowledge greatly in relation to how to assess impact, how to undertake cost effectiveness analysis with minimal data, how to assess NGOs' ability to innovate, how to assess NGOs' flexibility, or how to undertake a gender or environmental analysis of NGO development interventions [2]

The final issue to be raised in the introduction to this chapter concerns the question why is it that a large number of donors have commissioned studies on the impact of the NGO development interventions they have funded, except for two of the country case study countries – Belgium and France Why is this so? According to the Belgian and French country case studies (Appendices 1 and 4), there would appear to be two main reasons The first and most important, is that in aggregate terms the amounts of donor money channelled to NGOs for development work has been quite small In the case of France, this explanation is, in part, confirmed by the country/geographic studies undertaken of all French aid these studies provide no data or information on NGO activities in these areas funded by donor money Secondly, because there would appear to be little difference in view between donors and NGOs on the purpose and methods there was felt to be little need for the donors to initiate independent evaluation assessments Thematic studies have been commissioned though it is argued the quality of these has not been very high

The rest of this chapter discusses a number of methodological approaches and issues in more detail, giving examples from the different donor commissioned studies

7 2 Judging impact

As noted in **Chapter 3** above, influenced particularly by the detailed TOR written for the specific studies undertaken, methodological discussions in the different reports focused predominantly on the list of questions to be addressed Together, the donor commissioned studies have assessed impact in relation to the following broad headings achievement against objectives, impact on livelihoods in general and on poverty status in particular, sustainability and cost-effectiveness, innovation and flexibility, replicability and scaling up, gender, environmental impact and, finally, impact in relation to democracy and pluralism objectives Within the "group two" cluster of studies listed above, some focused on quite a small set of issues For instance, the Canadian study addressed four rationale, impact, effectiveness and efficiency However most others in this cluster also explicitly included the issue of sustainability which, for almost 20 years, has dominated USAID sponsored assessments of PVOs [3] As the following examples illustrate, the Australian, Swedish, first British and United States' studies provide the greatest details on impact assessment methods used

7 2 1 Australia

The Australian study used nine assessment criteria against which to judge impact most of which are common to wider non-NGO evaluations

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[2] As discussed in Chapter 3 there is some discussion about how to assess and approach the issue of sustainability

[3] The Canadian study did discuss sustainability noting that more precise measures will have to be developed if sustainability is to mean something (p xii)

1 Has the project been successful in achieving its stated and implicit objectives?
2 Were there any unanticipated benefits or negative effects?
3 If poverty alleviation was an objective, how successful was the project in improving the economic status of the beneficiaries?
4 What was the impact on and involvement of women?
5 What was the impact on the environment?
6 To what extent did the project foster self reliance and community initiative?
7 Are project activities or benefits likely to be sustainable without further assistance?
8 Were the projects financially viable?
9 Overall, did the projects produce enough benefits to outweigh the costs of implementation?

These questions were assessed and classified within the framework of seven possible responses

1 Little or no achievement of desired outcome
2 Some achievement but not sufficient to be considered satisfactory
3 Partial but satisfactory achievement of desired outcome
4 High or complete achievement of desired outcome
5 Project exceeded expectations
6 Insufficient information to make a judgement
7 Question not relevant to project

7 2 2 Sweden

The Swedish study assessed impact in relation to four question-clusters

1 Project assessment in relation to the achievement of direct and immediate objectives
2 Project assessment in relation to the achievement of additional near term objectives
3 Project assessment judged in relation to factors beyond the project, including institutional and policy issues as well as comparisons with non NGO development efforts
4 Broad based assessment in which NGO achievement beyond the discrete project is viewed in relation to broader contextual criteria

In order to assess their achievement in relation to their immediate objectives, the projects were assessed against the following three criteria how closely they conformed to core stated objectives for which Sida originally agreed to provide state funding, the degree to which they are succeeding, or have succeeded, in achieving their stated objectives, and how the benefits achieved relate to the costs outlaid Additionally, each project was assessed against nine criteria, whose composition was rooted in a mix of the over-arching purposes of Swedish aid and assumed strengths of NGO development interventions

1 The extent to which the project was assisting the poor and, in particular, the extent to which it was assisting the poorest
2 The extent to which the intended beneficiaries had participated, and were participating, in different aspects of the project
3 The extent to which gender issues had been incorporated into the project, in both its preparation and while running, as well as the nature of the project's impact on prevailing gender relations
4 The extent to which environmental factors were considered in designing and executing the project, and what the environmental impact of the project is and has been

5 Evidence from the projects/programmes assessed of the impact of Swedish technical personnel their importance, their training of local people, the potential for their replacement and lessons learnt
6 The extent to which the interventions funded have been innovative, have exhibited flexible and adaptable characteristics, and the extent to which they have been, or have the potential to be, replicable elsewhere
7 The extent to which pre project assessment took place prior to start up, the extent to which, and the methods by which, ongoing project monitoring has taken place, and whether final evaluation has taken place or is planned
8 The extent to which the projects reviewed could be considered sustainable
9 The extent to which issues related to democracy and human rights have been considered in drawing up and executing the project, and ways in which the projects, in practice, enhance democracy and particular human rights

7 2 3 The first British study

The first British study differed from the other studies in two main respects Firstly, sufficient funds enabled the different project evaluations to be undertaken over a far longer period than in probably all the other studies, ranging from at least two and up to four weeks for each project rather than half a day to 2/3/4 days more common in most of the other studies Secondly, a detailed description of the methods used was published These featured a number of attributes

- The attempt to distinguish between project outputs and outcomes and impact, reflected in the question 'Has the change in economic status of the beneficiaries been due more to the impact of the project than to the influence of other non project factors or vice versa?'
- The attempt to form judgements by testing, refining and verifying these by discussions with different stakeholders beneficiaries, NGO staff, government officials, other NGOs working in the vicinity and non beneficiaries
- Downplaying the gathering and analysis of data, especially if it proved time-consuming and if it was likely that conflictual data and judgements could not easily be reconciled
- The attempt to view projects through the eyes of the beneficiaries, achieved by a mix of the time spent in the project area and utilising techniques and tools developed in social and anthropological analysis [4]

7 2 4 The United States studies

What is striking about most of the United States studies has been the manner in which, and the confidence with which, they have assessed PVO projects using specific indicators, in spite of encountering the same sorts of data limitations and constraints of the other donor studies The first, and most rigorous, United States study (in 1979) assessed impact by focusing on and trying to address four questions are PVO activities resulting in development benefits are these benefits accruing primarily to the poorest members of the population will project benefits be sustained when PVO activities are phased out and are PVO activities cost-effective in terms of potential spread and replicability? It attempted to judge impact in three different ways through examining the direct benefits generated by the commitment of PVO resources, standardised for differences in project costs (the benefits), by assessing the potential that those benefits will be sustained after the donor's

[4] See Riddell (1990) Not all the projects evaluated succeeded in achieving the objectives of the methodology described see Riddell and Robinson 1995

resources are exhausted or withdrawn (benefit continuation), and assessing the prospects for future development in related activities by the same participant population based upon the success of the present project (benefit growth) As with all the other studies, this one suffered from time constraints and from little to no base-line data Undeterred, it focused on qualitative data which, mixed with personal judgements, led to scoring assessments against established indicators

In terms of benefits, the study assessed the number of direct beneficiaries and estimated the dollar value of the benefits of the different projects per beneficiary, it then estimated the annual recurring costs per beneficiary and subtracted these when it was assumed these were potentially payable, finally, it assessed the project costs per beneficiary and calculated (estimated) the ratio of benefits to cost If projects were not strictly economic ones then the economic benefits were assumed and assessed [5]

In terms of benefit continuation, the study used the following three indicators and scoring system

1 *Local organisations and project decision making* It gave the following scores/ratings no organisations exists (0), participants newly organised (1), organisation has assumed some decision making functions (2), organisation fully responsible for the project (3)
2 *Participant contributions to the project* A distinction was made here between projects requiring service/budget support and those needing infrastructural support, for which scores of 0 to 3 were made respectively For service budget support service provided free (0), formal subsidy of the project (1), participants' contributions partly cover costs (2), they cover all costs (3) For infrastructure no contribution, paid labour (0), labour on food for work basis (1), cash/labour contribution on more than one occasion (2), cash/labour on ongoing basis (3)
3 *Adequacy of project related mechanisms for mobilising savings* This was rated as follows external subsidy required for continuation (0), local resources adequate, but no mechanisms to mobilise them (1), sufficient local resource mechanism exists but is unproven (2), resources can be tapped by current mechanisms (3)

In this instance, the scores given were not only the best judgement of the evaluators, but they were predictive judgements of what it was assumed would happen in the future This was equally true for the three indicators developed to assess benefit growth These were the adoption of practices recommended by the project, evidence of individual farm or household level modernising improvements, and evidence of the adoption of new activities beyond the project undertaken at the community level

A more recent example of the use of indicators in the United States comes from the Office of Private Voluntary Cooperation's Strategic Plan for 1996 to 2000 This focuses, in particular, on sustainability indicators These are defined as 'those which would lead OPVC to believe that services initiated by PVOs and their NGO partners will continue once OPVC funding has ended' (p 53) At minimum, programmes must sustain at least 50 per cent of the service coverage level achieved during the period of OPVC support, with service delivery provided by a US PVO or through its local partner

[5] The clarity and simplicity of the methods used contrast often quite sharply with the simplicity of the assumption made For instance in a project providing agricultural advice to farmers it was assumed that the advice would lead to increased crop yields that one third of farmers would adopt the new practices applying these to two acre plots yielding an additional three bags of maize

7 2 5 Verification initiatives Canada and Australia

As discussed more fully below (see §7 3) these donor commissioned studies have been carried out by groups (often large groups) of evaluators including external evaluators One question this raises is why NGOs cannot undertake these evaluations for themselves they are likely to cost less In this context two of the donor studies the Canadian and Australian are of interest because of the way they undertook similar sorts of experiments which compared the views of NGOs and their staff concerning a range of impact related issues with selected expert groups

The Canadian approach was to ask the Canadian NGOs to rate themselves and their projects by responding to particular questions The results obtained were then compared with the assessments made by two groups of people first a team of 21 consultants who had evaluated NGO projects and second the staff of the NGO division Overall while the results of this exercise revealed a high level of consistency this lay in NGOs allocating higher scores than the external team in terms of judgements made about different performance criteria

The Australian approach was to use what the report termed the self verification of NGOs or the verification procedure This worked as follows First the NGOs were asked to assess their own projects in relation to specified criteria (listed above) Secondly the review team went out to visit projects in order to undertake field assessments and make their own judgements in relation to the same criteria Thirdly and because these field visits only embraced some 1 per cent of all projects funded and were thus viewed as too small a sample upon which to draw wider conclusions a further 10 per cent sample of projects was selected and assessed by the review team by means of reading the file documentation of projects This process led to the review team grouping answers into two categories those in which similar assessments/ratings were made and those in which marked differences were recorded The results were as follows

Areas where NGO self-assessment was verified
in relation to
- self-reliance
- sustainability
- impact on women
- meeting women's needs
- environmental impact

Areas where NGO self-assessment was not verified[6]
in relation to
- poverty alleviation
- financial viability
- involvement/participation of women
- cost effectiveness

[6] The analysis shows the relative differences in scores not necessarily different views about performance and outcome Thus for example the NGOs rated the involvement/participation of women in their projects the lowest however the external team rated performance here even lower

7 3 Participatory evaluation and who evaluates

As discussed in **Chapter 8** below, the issue of participatory evaluation is one of major interest to NGOs The purpose of this section is to summarise the role and importance attached to participatory evaluation in the donor studies and to discuss who has been involved in these donor commissioned evaluations

Two generalisations can be made about the donor studies in relation to participation in the evaluation process The first is that the issue was far from unimportant in *all* of the studies At the extreme and negatively, no cases were found of evaluations deliberately undertaken solely by external evaluators and not involving stake holders at the project level More positively, the intention was invariably to involve some degree of interaction with some of the project stake-holders This does not mean that interaction with all stake holders consistently took place In particular, shortages of time and money frequently meant that, in some cases, project visits never took place and assessment had to depend upon written documentation, more often that discussion took place with the staff of the NGO implementing the project, but not with the project beneficiaries However, in the majority of cases there were varying degrees of interaction with the project beneficiaries Indeed, a recent study commissioned by the DAC Expert Group on Aid Evaluation singles out donor-commissioned studies of NGO development interventions as those which, among all donor evaluations, *did* employ participatory techniques [7]

The second generalisation is that there were great differences in the ways that the various evaluation studies approached the issue of participation Two aspects need to be considered first, the role of the beneficiaries in the evaluation, and second, who did the evaluations As noted, though the intention was often to involve the beneficiaries in the evaluation, even when this occurred it differed greatly in terms of both the nature of the involvement and its degree of intensity Least common was the experience of the first UK study which attempted (and usually succeeded) in the main evaluators staying at the project site for a prolonged period, not infrequently well beyond a week and sometimes for over two weeks [8] More common were visits of 2/3/4 days Outside the 'development tourism visits of an hour or two, the usual form of interaction with the beneficiaries was to use some sort of focus group discussion using open or guided questions More often than not, too discussion with beneficiaries was accompanied by discussion with the staff of the NGO implementing the project What other roles did the beneficiaries play in the evaluation process? Most commonly, very little they were not involved in determining the terms of reference of the studies and were not on the evaluation teams In summary while involvement with the beneficiaries frequently occurred, it was often in an (artificial perhaps strained) context where hurried answers were sought to hurried questions

This leads to the question of who undertook the evaluations Most commonly, these donor-commissioned evaluations were undertaken by experienced evaluators, most with expertise in undertaking NGO evaluations, but usually not people from the NGOs concerned Additionally, the studies were usually conducted by teams of evaluators Some, like the Australian Canadian the United States and a number of the EC studies, were dominated by nationals of the donor country However, a more common practice was for the external evaluators to join with local consultants and undertake joint evaluations This

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[7] Development Studies Unit (1995 24 and 25)

> *Despite participation rhetoric there is little evidence of participation in evaluation even in evaluations of NGO support NGO evaluations however did to a greater extent than evaluations of core support bilateral programmes employ participatory techniques The NGO evaluations seem to employ somewhat more innovative criteria and methods than those for mainstream programmes*

[8] The UK/Zimbabwe study comments that in one instance the beneficiaries wanted to know why the evaluator was still there long after the time when other evaluators would have long gone back to town

occurred in the case of the Dutch, Swedish Finnish, first British and Danish studies Additionally, though far rarer, some of the studies (the first UK study) used local NGO personnel Uniquely, the Finnish study of NGO projects in Tanzania consisted entirely of a team of Tanzanian consultants The involvement of local evaluators was more common when the evaluations were broken down into discrete country initiatives In most cases, the southern evaluators were in the minority, however the four Swedish country studies comprised four external and five local evaluators One of the New Zealand studies (the Tonga study) is interesting as it was realised early on that a Tongan was needed and was co opted into the team Finally, the second UK study comprised various 'teams' the core teams consisted of donor, or donor-selected, and northern NGO personnel However, many of the (12) project evaluations included consultants and NGO employees from the south The outcome was often quite sizeable teams one evaluation of two Christian Aid projects in Burkino Faso comprised a team of no less than 10 people!

In terms of gender composition, the teams varied However, in almost all cases the majority of teams comprised more men than women, and more often than not the team leader was male For instance, the Australian team consisted of five people, two women and three men, the peer review team consisting of six people, three men and three women However, at least one of the second UK evaluations had a majority of women evaluators [9] Importantly, too, it has become increasingly common for donors to assess potential evaluators in relation to gender sensitivity Thus, it is increasingly questionable to assume that a team with more males will *necessarily* address gender issues with less rigour than a team with a majority of females, even if sometimes it may be necessary to have not only women but evaluators who are culturally acceptable to the beneficiaries at the project level in order to help address at least some of the major problems likely to arise when seeking opinions and judgements on externally-promoted development interventions [10]

A final point to make in this discussion links the issue of participation back to the analysis of impact discussed in **Chapter 3** There it was noted that there is often a gap between NGOs' expression of the importance of participation and the practice of participation on the ground Thus, one reason why participatory evaluation has been constrained in many donor-commissioned studies is rooted in the non-participatory nature of many projects, or in the weak degree of participation manifest in the projects under examination In many respects, there is a contradiction in trying to undertake a participatory evaluation of a project which exhibits few participatory characteristics

7 4 Implications of the donor-commissioned studies in terms of methodology

The purpose of this section is to summarise what the donor commissioned evaluation studies have said about impact evaluation and especially about methods and approaches, supplementing this information with some details of subsequent decisions The comments made here are far from complete, in some cases they are supplemented by information provided in the country and donor case studies and discussed in the next chapter **(Chapter 8)**

Perhaps surprisingly given the space given in these reports to detailing the weaknesses and inadequacies of prevailing gaps in knowledge about impact the different reports do not place much emphasis in recommending that major additional donor commissioned studies be undertaken Rather, the recommendations made fall into three groups or clusters most of which do not make recommendations specific to methodological questions First, in relation to donor commissioned studies recommendations

[9] The gender breakdown given here is based on partial and incomplete information the team writing this Report has not been able to trace the gender of all evaluators listed in the donor commissioned reports

[10] It has been argued that it is never possible to obtain sufficient trust in short term one off evaluations

are made for the introduction or expansion of sectoral studies (see the Danish and Dutch studies) Secondly, a number of studies caution against too much donor involvement in evaluation and in demands made The best examples of this type of conclusion come from Denmark and the United States For Denmark, a recent paper from the NGO Unit argues unequivocally that 'the responsibility for evaluation of projects implemented by NGOs rests with the NGOs themselves' For the United States, a 1993 study is highly critical of donors imposing unnecessary burdens on NGOs in terms of providing information (to them) at the project level, notably in terms of inputs Thus (US, 1993 22 and 23)

> *The USAID approach (project implementation) establishes a burdensome system of surveillance which stifles creativity and diverts energy from important long term program goals Audit requirements tend to be burdensome expensive and preoccupied with trivia They discourage small PVOs and act as a disincentive to United States organisations in working with indigenous organisations The pre-occupation with INPUT management and the detailed review and approval of inconsequential management decisions needs to be replaced with a substantive concern for the achievement of fundamental goals*

This quotation raises a question about the *purpose* of donor-commissioned studies, in this case the extent to which evaluation for NGOs should be perceived as part of the process of auditing the funds allocated by donors – in order to ensure that public funds are being and have been well spent – as against evaluation perceived as part of a process of learning learning, for instance, about impact and how to improve it, or, perhaps, learning about methods of evaluating development interventions

It would seem from the earlier comments in this section that the thrust of many of the donor commissioned studies is to question the dominance of evaluation as-audit However, if the purpose of evaluation is to learn more about impact and to share information on methods, then there is little evidence to suggest that this has been the thrust Consequently, at least by default, there are quite strong grounds for suggesting that it *has been* the audit function which has been dominant There are three reasons for this Firstly, it has been the exception rather than the rule for the results of these donor commissioned studies to be shared with the NGOs implementing the projects, though in some cases steps have been taken to discuss the results with the donor based NGOs A good example would be the Swedish study which was discussed at a three day seminar with the evaluators in Stockholm and was followed by a series of NGO-led initiatives Secondly, there has been very little interchange with NGOs to discuss the methods of evaluation used in these donor commissioned studies And thirdly the fact that many donors have highlighted the need to build capacity of NGOs and to focus more on thematic rather than over-arching studies of impact tends to confirm the view that it has been the audit function of these over-arching evaluations which have been important

These considerations lead on to a deeper question concerning how NGO development interventions should be judged The 1993 US study just quoted, gives pride of place to the *results achieved* 'Attempts to develop a performance based evaluation system should be redoubled The existence of such a system would encourage a shift away from an excessively heavy emphasis on INPUTS to an emphasis on RESULTS' (1993 24) To the extent that evaluations are linked more strongly to audits than to learning processes, this points to an additional link between results and funds allocated It also suggests that the future for evaluation methods lies predominantly in devising more and more accurate methods by which to assess the results achieved Such a view is well summarised in the Canadian study (page xiv)

> *The quality of work done by NGOs should be major concern behind NGO funding Funding should be based on a performance measurement system using specific performance indicators and each NGO should be provided on a confidential basis with the results of its evaluation*

The implication of evaluation methods developing within this perspective is that NGO development interventions will be more likely to be judged in the same manner and on the same basis as official aid projects or even comparable private sector interventions In short assessing and managing by results tends to accentuate similarities between NGO interventions and other development agents rather than any real or potential differences What is thus particularly interesting is that movement towards and support for a more results oriented perspective is by no means shared across all the donor-commissioned studies In particular a number of studies especially the Australian and subsequent policy thrusts of other donor agencies such as the Norwegian Danish and Dutch severely caution against adopting a results oriented approach as the *sole* basis for judging and evaluating NGO development interventions specifically because learning experimentation risk and innovation are likely to be proportionately under-emphasised and undervalued Thus the Australian evaluation team (page 44 and 45)

> *believes that if NGOs were to lose their autonomy in programming and policy dialogue they might become increasingly* like *government agencies While this might make the relationship more harmonious the Review Team believes that in time NGOs would come to offer the Government LESS as development partners*
>
> *NGO capacities for innovation and developing new areas and new forms of development cooperation may diminish as they increasingly follow the requirements and objectives set by Government The more NGOs follow AusAid s agenda the less they are likely to forge their own ideas objectives strategies as has been claimed for some Danish NGOs*
>
> *AusAid does not expect private companies to harness the voluntary resources of the Australian community to represent the interests of the wider community in policy development processes or to undertake a third sector role It doesn t expect private companies to provide community to community links It is therefore important for AusAid to set an overall policy framework for its NGO program which seeks to minimise the risks to NGO independence while retaining accountability for the use of public funds*

For its part and in similar vein Denmark has raised the possibility of support to smaller and innovative activities in order to ensure that the particular thrust and orientation which NGOs bring to development is not lost or excessively diluted [11] Likewise the first (1990) New Zealand study argues that constraints of language time and technical skills among third world partners increases the risk of not being able to maintain effective accountability systems including monitoring and evaluation However this is a risk that government must be prepared to take (page 56)

These examples of different perspectives presented in these donor commissioned studies in relation to the purpose and role of NGO development interventions provide an entry point for a discussion of evaluation methods beyond the confines of this narrow cluster of studies a discussion – as **Chapter 8** reveals – that raises additional key questions about methods and approaches

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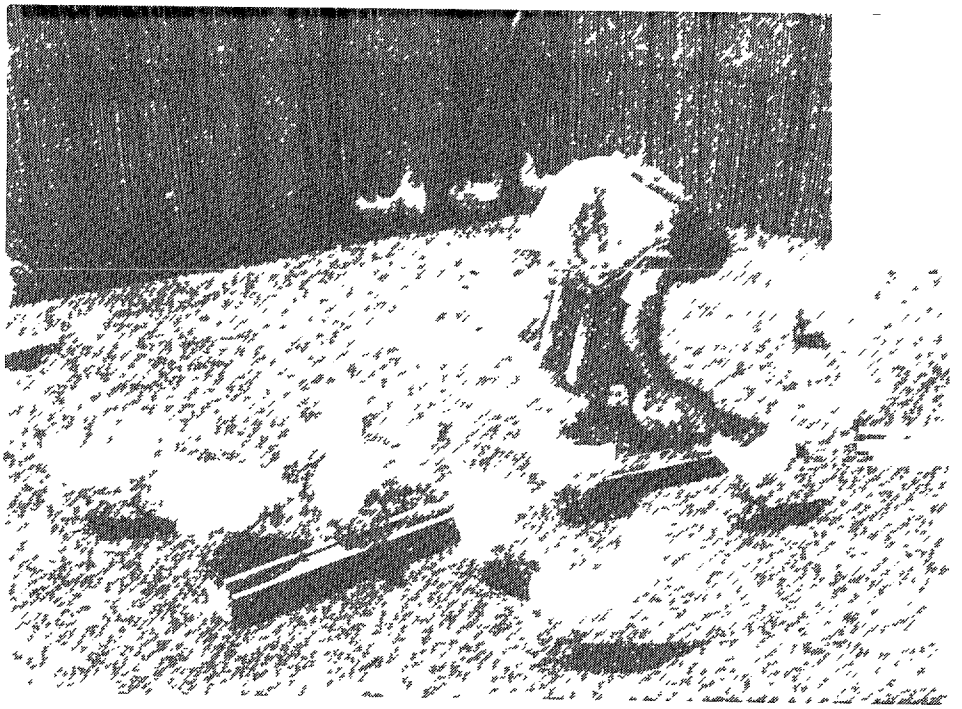
[11] Such an initiative can be traced back to the following comment in the Danish report (page 116)

> *Many NGOs have expressed that it is difficult to be innovative and take risks if projects are based on Danida money They feel that the Danida system in spite of recent improvements is too rigid*



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8

METHODS AND APPROACHES BEYOND THE DONOR-COMMISSIONED STUDIES

8 1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide some preliminary comments on methods and methodological approaches related to NGO development interventions beyond the core group of donor commissioned studies The chapter starts by outlining some of the (differing) attitudes NGOs have towards donor initiated evaluation studies, focusing especially on the methods used It then goes on to discuss the ways that NGOs go about evaluating their development interventions, this discussion provides a comparison of NGO methods and those used in donor commissioned studies In both parts of the chapter a conscious effort is made to discuss any differences between northern and southern NGOs and between southern intermediary NGOs and community-based organisations

The data and information contained in this chapter are drawn predominantly from the 13 country and donor based studies commissioned for this Study, reproduced as separate appendices This is supplemented in various places with references to other cited studies which have been informed by a more rapid reading of the majority of the texts referenced in *Appendix 14* As it was necessary to keep this chapter fairly short and concise, *most* of the issues discussed here constitute extremely truncated bites of longer and more detailed examples and wider discussion Hence it is strongly recommended that readers interested in the specific topics raised or specific examples of the different ways in which NGOs are adopting or experimenting with different approaches to evaluation delve into the relevant appendices for more complete information A further point to make is that the sample of countries selected for closer scrutiny is not representative of either the north or south Thus, the conclusions drawn here need to be viewed as tentative and to be confirmed, refined or even challenged as and when more extensive information is obtained

This chapter highlights a number of common themes and trends across countries and the wider literature These include the following

- There is both a growing interest among NGOs in the issues of evaluation, and growing recognition of the need to undertake evaluations It is especially larger NGOs in both the north and the south, and medium-sized NGOs in the north, which are most heavily involved in trying to develop evaluation methods While there would appear to be quite good networking between specific northern and southern partners, and more generally between larger northern and large southern NGOs, the medium-sized NGOs appear to be more isolated

- NGOs are undertaking a series of rich and varied but often uncoordinated activities to try to deepen knowledge about methods of evaluation These include the most of the issues raised in the donor commissioned studies (efficiency effectiveness sustainability, gender the environment etc) One set of approaches concerns undertaking thematic studies A second set of approaches involves activities focusing particularly on indicators, cost effectiveness, capacity building and gender Most progress seems to have been made in relation to more narrow and more economically-focused methods, least progress in relation to social sector activities

- Yet there is more evidence of this type of action among large and medium sized NGOs than among and across smaller NGOs Nonetheless the evidence gathered suggests that, though much remains undocumented and unwritten, self evaluation by smaller NGOs and CBOs not only exists but in some areas is flourishing

- There is widespread acknowledgement of major data problems as well as poor to inadequate systems of monitoring, as well as base-line data against which to compare performance These suggest that NGO initiated impact evaluations tend to be as difficult to undertake as donor commissioned evaluations and that similar problems of lack of impact data are experienced However while many NGOs are aware of the need to ensure that judgements made can be verified they often appears to be less concern with filling quantitative gaps in data

- The country studies provide numerous examples to support the view that NGOs are involved in an array of different forms of development activity some of which are likely to be strong candidates for impact assessment others less In particular development interventions which focus on activities which aim to enhance livelihoods both over the longer term and less directly than discrete concrete and more tangible projects are unlikely to be able to produce firm data and conclusions on impact assessment particularly with current assessment tools These include a wide array of initiatives concerned with the following consciousness-raising solidarity support supporting democratic organisations and initiatives working to support and defend human and other rights (land rights) protecting and fostering community organisations capacity building and more structurally focused gender initiatives

- Many southern NGOs and CBOs lump together and see little difference between donor commissioned and northern NGO commissioned evaluation studies However it is important not to make sweeping generalisations not least because of quite extensive interaction between some northern and southern NGOs

- In spite of some harsh criticisms of donor commissioned evaluations it is quite widely acknowledged, not least by southern NGOs that both donor and northern NGOs have a legitimate interest in undertaking evaluations

- Though there is considerable overlap with donor commissioned studies in relation to the issues addressed in project evaluations, NGO evaluations tend to be coloured by three major concerns and differences
  i In NGO evaluations, major emphasis is placed on the need to incorporate more participatory methods into evaluations, including especially the need to incorporate the beneficiaries in the evaluation process though there remains still a considerable gap between intention and practice
  ii In NGO evaluations major emphasis is placed on evaluation as a learning tool thus the feedback of results is seen as of paramount importance
  iii For many NGOs evaluation is not merely seen as an integral part of appraisal and monitoring and not to be separated from it but is also seen as a part of overall strategic planning

- Nevertheless the case studies provided evidence of a number of donor-commissioned studies incorporating learning processes and leading to changes in project parameters

- Among many northern NGOs there is a growing interest in process and longer term engagement with communities the outcome of which is to dilute the former dominance of focus on discrete projects This has led to growing interest in evaluations and evaluation methods other than project evaluations Yet here again there often remains quite a large gap between intention and practice

- Also among many northern NGOs as well as donors there is a growing focus on capacity building and institutional strengthening The likely implications of this trend continuing are that both interest in and information about the impact of discrete projects will be further reduced

Finally the chapter draws attention to differences across countries in relation to attitudes to evaluation Not only is there no simple NGO approach or attitude but the evidence gathered thus far tends to lead to the conclusion that there is a greater spread and difference of view and approach to evaluation across NGOs in different countries than there is among donor agencies

8 2 NGO views on evaluations

Whereas 10 to 15 years ago especially among NGOs outside the United States, there was widespread ignorance about and often hostility towards evaluations the view of the vast majority of NGOs today is that evaluations are not merely useful exercises but important activities Nonetheless a small number of NGOs continues to be wary of the whole debate about evaluation viewing it as a means of disempowering the poor [1]

There is however a difference between support for evaluation in general and support for the sorts of evaluation methods used in donor commissioned studies Though the evidence gathered here is far from comprehensive it would appear that some of the harshest words for donor commissioned studies come from southern NGOs The loudest and most consistent critical voice came from the Kenyan study which speaks of widespread unease' at donor evaluations because of their focus on upward accountability their narrow focus on things and their failure to involve the communities, and because of a fear that the perceived linked concerns with accountability and sustainability are viewed by some as a prelude to future radical disengagement In marked contrast however the Senegal study found southern NGOs accepting of northern evaluations as legitimate exercises and making few criticisms of the methods used

The Brazilian and Bangladesh studies provide less sharp and in general more refined attitudes with NGOs consulted in these countries expressing the view that external (northern) evaluations were legitimate but that they suffered from major weaknesses The weaknesses identified included the following

- their high costs
- their dominant focus on the past and not the future
- their limited scope
- their lack of participatory approaches
- their preoccupation with financial sustainability
- their use of pre packaged methods which failed to embrace the complexities of different social contexts and their failure to incorporate cultural and religious dimensions of the beneficiaries lives and finally
- the fact that skilled evaluators were brought to visit projects but did not stay long enough to share their expertise with the project and local NGO staff

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[1] As Howes put it (1992 393)

Some exponents are openly hostile to evaluation in particular arguing that it only appears to be a way of promoting greater efficiency when its real function is to provide an additional means by which powerful external forces may exert political control over the poor

But even these two studies differed in terms of some important perspectives Thus, the Bangladesh study reported that in some cases NGOs were not consulted on the terms of reference of these external studies and were not usually involved in the selection of consultants, whereas the Brazilian NGOs reported satisfactory consultation and influence on both counts

Shifting to the northern country studies, most of these reported high levels of interaction and cooperation between the respective donors and NGOs, arising from widespread agreement in terms of methods and approach – far more marked than differences and disagreements The Belgian, French, Norwegian and United States studies in particular, reflected this perspective, with the Norwegian study noting the direct influence which NORAD has had in moulding the evaluation approaches subsequently used by the NGOs The Netherlands case differs somewhat from others within this group of countries to the extent that potential tension and disagreement over approaches tend to be minimised by the fact that the co financing agencies are influential in deciding the national agenda and processes of evaluation that will be carried out The Finnish study differs from this larger group of countries inasmuch as it indicates quite widespread interest in evaluation and evaluation methods but little evidence of interaction with the government either in terms of developing a common approach or as appears more common elsewhere, in terms of the government encouraging NGOs to use a particular approach

The UK case study stands out as different again, but in this instance in terms of articulating a range of different clusters of criticisms and concerns about the whole thrust of what are termed traditional/orthodox approaches to evaluation, and the attempt to draw firm policy conclusions from them A number of these criticisms echo those heard from the southern country case studies They are grouped into clusters relating to what evaluations have achieved and what they can be expected to achieve, to the role and place of evaluation (and evaluators) in general, and of different types of and approaches to evaluation in particular, and to the different ways the results of these evaluations can be used (and misused)

Thus, a first set of criticisms is that the data are inadequate to draw firm conclusions on impact and outcome, and the linked issues of effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability Additionally, it is asked whether it is possible to use methods of evaluation which are rooted in economic analysis and accountancy and place strong emphasis on quantitative data, to evaluate community and social development projects whose outputs are likely to be less easy to measure It is further argued that the failure of evaluations to provide reliable information on impact is rooted in the absence of baseline data and regular monitoring Consequently, to the extent that increased attention continues to be given to evaluation and evaluation methods as discrete stand alone exercises – as, it is argued, donors are increasingly doing – these same donors will be lured into thinking that the answers to impact questions lie predominantly in focusing on and attempting to draw answers from impact evaluations

A second set of criticisms of donor approaches to evaluation made by UK NGOs is that they are biased towards a focus on discrete projects whereas on the one hand, many NGO interventions need to be viewed as sub elements of longer term and usually more complex *processes* of development, and on the other both project and process work are expanding in response to growing concerns with institutional and capacity building initiatives These observations, and especially the comment about a sharper focus on capacity building, have strong resonances in some of the other country case studies, most notably the Norwegian and Netherlands studies

A third set of criticisms focuses on the issue of accountability Within this context a vigorous criticism of externally initiated and/or donor evaluations of UK NGO development projects is that they have been instituted largely as part of a narrow concern to ensure merely that the funds provided have been well spent The criticism is not that it is wrong or illegitimate for project implementors to be thus accountable

– no UK NGO has made such a statement Rather, concerns are expressed about what is left out or eclipsed Two issues are raised, the first concerns the need to focus on accountability downwards, the second concerns what many NGOs consider to be a far more important purpose of evaluation, namely to form part of a wider set of tools focused on learning in order to enhance future impact External evaluations are seen as less helpful than, and often directly contrasting with, both participatory evaluations and self evaluations which focus far more on learning, learning tools and learning processes At the very least, it is asserted that donors need to concentrate as much on evaluations which focus on learning and which attempt to address the accountability needs of the beneficiaries as on evaluations which meet the accountability needs of other stakeholders

The final concern with donor initiated and commissioned evaluations raised in the British case study concerns the growing emphasis placed on the results of development interventions, with impact assessments seen as a major new and growing data source informing donors about results achieved While no British NGO argues that results do not matter a number contend that *assessing performance* by results achieved increases the likelihood that the *future funding* of NGOs will increasingly be influenced by comparisons of results achieved This, it is argued, will tend to have the following adverse effects

- NGOs will be driven to implement less risky interventions,
- NGOs will shift their focus away from trying to target poorer people (because these projects tend to be more costly),
- NGOs will be encouraged to undertake fewer experimental projects and to innovate less with new approaches and new ideas because of less certainty of the results likely to be achieved

In short, the suggestion is that *judging* by results will lead to *funding* by results which, in turn, will encourage NGOs to play safe' The effect is likely to shift the focus of NGO work more towards those of other development agents and to chip away at, if not eliminate entirely, the strengths and characteristics of NGO interventions in development Part of this process is likely to see the establishment of NGOs set up and driven predominantly with a concern for achieving benefits at lower and lower costs with little regard for benefit quality It is important, however, to note that the Chilean case study draws attention to donor commissioned studies which did not reflect the general thrust of these criticisms Thus, during the Pinochet era the study comments that

> *When donors did organise evaluations it was common practice for the NGO to participate in the selection of the evaluator or members of the evaluation team the methodology to be employed and at times participate in the evaluation process itself By and large these evaluations were heavily qualitative and process minded and concerned less with issues of efficiency and effectiveness or development impact From the donors perspective the evaluation served the useful purpose of gathering arguments to justify continued support for the NGO s work*

Another different concern focuses on the difference between smaller and larger NGOs While larger NGOs (in both the north and south) are now increasingly introducing new and sometimes quite sophisticated approaches to evaluation there is concern (often quite vocal) among smaller NGOs about the appropriateness of using such methods to assess the impact of their development interventions One concern is cost it can happen that large evaluations of small projects can cost even more than the project itself But perhaps more widespread is a concern that if smaller NGOs were to utilise main-stream' evaluation techniques they would need such different skills that developing and using them would risk altering the nature of the (small) organisation itself Such concerns would apply with even greater force to CBOs

The final point which needs to be stressed in this section is that regardless of the vigour of criticism made against particular types of evaluation the UK country case study shares with both the other southern and donor based case studies the universal belief that, despite differences in method and concerns with the misuse of the results, evaluations ought to take place

8 3 Evaluation methods and approaches used by NGOs

What methods of evaluation are NGOs either using or discussing and experimenting with? What is striking is that however vocal and extensive are the criticisms made against conventional/orthodox approaches many of the issues raised in the donor commissioned studies as appropriate for examination are raised and addressed in project evaluations undertaken or commissioned by NGOs Thus it is not only donor commissioned evaluations of NGO development interventions, but evaluations conducted by the NGOs themselves which focus on the following assessment against objectives, and assessment in terms of efficiency effectiveness and sustainability Additionally many (although fewer) evaluations assess impact in relation to gender and environmental issues

However, there are two major differences continually emphasised in NGO literature on evaluation, these are the pride of place given to participation and the importance of learning As the manual produced by SCF (UK) puts it the emphasis should always be on evaluation as a learning process' and a participatory approach can be used to some extent in most types of evaluation (SCF 1995)

To what extent do the ways in which these specific issues are assessed differ? More specifically do NGOs assess the achievement of objectives, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability in ways different from donor commissioned evaluations? It is here that it becomes difficult to make firm statements for two important reasons The first repeats a central point made at the outset to this Report, namely that data inadequacies mean that it is still difficult to undertake project impact evaluations for the majority of projects Secondly, comparisons between donor commissioned and NGO studies in terms of methods used are exceedingly difficult both because of the paucity of detailed studies and because NGO evaluations tend to share with donor commissioned studies the absence of detail when it comes to explaining precisely *how* the different issues were assessed

8 3 1 Work on indicators and experimentation

There are five features common to many NGO project evaluation approaches and methods that can be briefly mentioned here The first is the almost universal concern with participatory methods The second is a desire to find appropriate indicators with which to assess the different dimensions of impact And it is here that often one sees and reads of NGO concerns with using and attempting to analyse quantitative data, especially when there is no attempt to provide and analyse qualitative data as well, linked to attempts to develop more 'appropriate indicators However, in this context it is also important to note that there would appear to be less concern with these issues among many United States' PVOs than among NGOs in most other countries A third feature is the manner in which some NGOs who are focusing on evaluation (but by no means all) have sought deliberately to incorporate evaluation work into a broader/wider framework At the very least, this has entailed looking at evaluation within a wider continuum that embraces appraisal and monitoring, notably to address inadequacies in each However, for some NGOs the framework includes wider issues such as strategic planning In the UK an example would be Oxfam UK/I in Norway Redd Barna in the Netherlands NOVIB, and in the United States Oxfam America A fourth feature is that not merely are NGOs especially the larger ones, involved in experimenting with developing the tools of evaluation but many are deliberately trying to strengthen their own internal capacities to undertake

evaluations The fifth common feature is the extent and number of different NGO initiatives embracing experimentation with, and linked to research into, evaluation methods The case studies provide numerous examples of these initiatives, given their diversity it is not possible here to do more than merely refer to some of them What is more, it is apparent that far more is going on both within the different case study countries and in other countries than this Study was able to document Examples from the case studies include

- A four-country study initiated by ActionAid (UK) *Methods and Indicators for Measuring the Impact of Poverty Reduction Interventions*
- A joint Oxfam UK/I and Novib study launched in 1995 to increase understanding of methods to define and measure the impact of development projects
- A Norwegian study focusing on ways to measure the impact of food security initiatives
- Dutch studies (by Hivos) focusing in part on how to assess the gender dimension of projects
- A series of studies undertaken by graduate students in Finland focusing on different ways to evaluate projects especially of smaller, and often less experienced, NGOs
- A succession of studies, many originating in the United States developing methods to assess the impact of micro-enterprise projects, involving especially the development of indicators
- The Kenyan study cites more than six specific examples of NGOs experimenting with new ways of evaluating projects – CARE World Neighbors, ActionAid, Bread for the World and EZE – and describes in some detail a new participatory approach to impact assessment being pioneered by Oxfam UK/I in the country

For its part, the Chilean study makes the following comments about innovations in evaluation practice in that country

> *Some of this has come from donors some from NGOs some from sectorally focused NGO networks (but not from general NGO networks) some from independent NGO consultants/evaluators and perhaps most significantly much of the more innovative thinking seems to be coming from the state the new state that is now colonised by people who in the 1980s worked in the NGO sector Among the emerging innovations the following merit comment participatory learning and systematisation work on impact indicators work aimed at developing and adapting the use of logical framework analysis and efforts at institutionalising impact based evaluation*

It is important not to note that donor commissioned evaluations are more complex and rigorous than NGO led or commissioned evaluations As the Bangladesh study makes clear in its description of a major study published as *Beacon of Hope*, NGOs can and do mount highly complex impact evaluations In this particular case poverty impact was assessed using the following indicators the material well-being of the member households, vulnerability and crisis-coping strategies, and the institutional development of village organisations In all, 2,125 households were surveyed, including 750 non project households, 225 village profiles were undertaken of which 75 were non-project villages, and 24 village organisations were assessed in terms of their institutional capacity development

The Chilean case study provides other southern examples of experimentation with indicators It notes that there is a body of work evolving in Chile aimed at developing indicators for impact assessment and that work in developing these has come at the NGOs' initiative rather than from the pressure of funding agencies' Yet, confirming the evidence from the United States it is apparent that this work has tended to be done by NGOs with *specific sectoral interests* Thus, groups such as the Institute for Political Ecology (IEP) have sponsored events and projects oriented towards developing

indicators for environmental impact and assessment, both at project and policy levels Another example is that of Azul Consultants who have worked closely with REDESOL a network of micro enterprise NGOs, with a view (in part) to developing indicators appropriate for assessing the poverty impact of micro enterprise work Likewise, CEM, an NGO concerned with issues of gender in development, has worked on elaborating indicators for assessing the gender impacts of policy and also of more specific project interventions, while SODECAM, an NGO in Temuco closely linked to the Mapuche movement, has recently begun work on indicators for projects with indigenous groups (SODECAM, 1996)

8 3 2 Participatory evaluation

As noted above, one of the criticisms made about donor-commissioned evaluations is the low priority given to participation in evaluation, while one of the apparent common attributes of NGO evaluations is the manner in which they highlight the importance of participation in evaluation The case studies and the wider literature provide some comment on the nature and extent of participatory evaluation in NGO evaluations

The first point which is made in many places is that there is still a wide gap between theory and practice Thus, while almost all NGOs speak of the importance of participation and criticise donor commissioned studies for the absence or low priority given to participation, there is far less evidence of participation in NGO evaluations than these comments would suggest (see Oakley, 1996 for a discussion of this issue) The second general point to make is that the discussion of participation often confuses two different issues whether (all) evaluations should be participatory evaluations, and the precise role that the main beneficiaries (as well as other stakeholders) should play in the evaluation process There is an important difference between beneficiary participatory evaluation – when the beneficiaries are involved in the evaluation process – and seeking out the views and opinions of the beneficiaries as a necessary part of the evaluation process It is in terms of the latter that NGOs are largely in agreement However, differences remain as to the importance to be attached to their views At one extreme, it is argued that the views of the beneficiaries should always take precedence over the views of everyone else Though this is held strongly by some NGOs, the evidence gathered for this Study would suggest that among NGOs this is very much a minority view A more commonly held view is that the opinions of the beneficiaries are extremely important but that they should not necessarily, or always, be dominant

Concerning participatory evaluation, there seems to be a growing consensus among many NGOs that there are limits to the extent to which it is possible to undertake participatory evaluations involving the beneficiaries In particular, it is argued that it is far too ambitious to hope to involve the beneficiaries in evaluations especially if they have not been involved in either appraisal or ongoing monitoring and particularly if they have been involved in neither What is more, the available evidence (though it is certainly partial) suggests that this still seems to be very common [2] But even if the beneficiaries have been involved from the outset, precisely what should be their role in the evaluation? Certainly there is little evidence gathered for this Study which shows precisely how participatory evaluation might be undertaken in practice Indeed, a recent study which aimed to seek out and analyse examples of successful participatory practices concluded that examples were

[2] For instance a recent survey of project applications undertaken by the Swedish NGO organisation Forum Syd found that in 43 per cent of the cases examined the beneficiaries had played no role whatsoever in discussions involved in drawing up the project plans These results are similar to those obtained from the study by Martin and Quinney (1994)

extremely rare (Martin and Quinney, 1994) One of the best examples of a form of participatory evaluation uncovered in this Study was the Oxfam UK/I project in Wajir, north east Kenya While the process was certainly participatory, the implementers conclude that it would be inappropriate to even attempt to undertake evaluations dominated by the beneficiaries, arguing rather that an effective process of self-evaluation is one that explicitly recognises and grows out from an acknowledgement that both the project staff and the intended beneficiaries are stakeholders in the activities being undertaken and both need to be involved in the process of assessment (see Box A12 2)

Box 8 1, written by a southern (Kenyan) scholar, provides a southern perspective on the role and application of participatory evaluation, explaining when and where it is likely to be most effectively used

Box 8 1 The role and application of participatory evaluation techniques

Participatory evaluation cannot be bolted on at the end of a project, it must have been incorporated at the design stage There are many instances when we *cannot* utilise participatory evaluation principles

Community participation in evaluation, that is participatory evaluation, is best suited to evaluations which are designed to inform participants of the progress of their activities, and to help them improve the design of their implementation approaches Participatory evaluation is ideally implemented in a project which has an explicit output of building community capacity to plan, manage and evaluate project activities at the community level

The following should be seen as a guide in the development of participatory evaluation

1 The project is participatory in design process project, participatory action research, etc
2 Participants are implementing agents and have ownership of the project
3 Indicators are identified with participants
4 Community has a management role, particularly documentation/recording/storing information on the project interventions under review
5 The participatory evaluation's primary objective is to provide information to participants that will inform their decision making in the implementation of their role in the project
6 Participatory evaluation should be an integral component of a project's extension strategy and community capacity-building process

Source Ndung'u (1996)

The Chilean case study argues that it is not entirely clear why there is so little evidence of NGOs working with participatory approaches to evaluation Yet it found some examples one of which is the Centre for Education Research and Development (CIDE) CIDE requires all its own projects to have a strong evaluation component and that this assessment be based in considerable measure on client participation Interestingly, however while CIDE has developed these approaches to

evaluation, few NGOs have approached it for assistance in evaluating their work [3] That CIDE has done this where other NGOs have not is probably related to its own characteristics It is one of the smaller family of NGOs in Chile that call themselves 'academic centers', meaning they have as much a research focus as an action orientation It is also primarily concerned with popular education and this thematic commitment to popular learning in turn fosters a concern for participatory approaches

The final aspect of participatory/beneficiary evaluation to be noted is that the case studies confirmed the commonly heard assertion that small NGOs and CBOs undertake various forms of self-evaluation The Kenyan case study, in particular, found evidence of oral' self evaluation (nothing written down) which stretched over a fairly long time period – weeks rather than days Particularly interesting is the case of TAK, a CBO located in a Nairobi slum, both in relation to the sophisticated nature of the process of self evaluation undertaken by the beneficiaries and in the range of outcomes and conclusions which, it was assessed, would have differed quite sharply from the conclusions which professional/external evaluators would have been likely to have made

8 3 3 Performance measurement the case of the United States

Thus far in this chapter, little mention has been made of the United States This is not because of the absence of material but because a number of initiatives deserve particular attention For instance, the United States case study discusses at some length the development and use of performance measurement approaches Thus, the majority of the PVOs contacted were developing their own performance measurement systems and were at various stages of identifying generic indicators against which to report The time frame for identifying indicators and generating a sufficient quantity and quality of data to report against appears to be a minimum of four years

Of particular interest was the fact that performance measurement was being developed by a range of PVOs, not just those organisations that receive funding from the government However, those that are less dependent on government funding were found to be taking a more participatory approach, identifying generic indicators and developing methodologies for their assessment, through the active participation of the local communities and partners with whom they work The importance of flexibility was continually stressed by all those adopting performance measurement systems Thus, performance measurement was viewed as encouraging locally defined indicators which would meet the information needs of project staff, partners and beneficiaries whilst 'passing up data on key indicators to the country, regional and central office

The United States' evidence suggests that the move to performance measurement has stimulated the development of more participatory methodologies for monitoring the impact of interventions This is based on the recognition that impact is best assessed by those closest to it, including project staff counterparts and local communities The need for baselines for this work has also provided the forum for increasing participation during project design and the basis for interventions that are more appropriate to the needs and priorities of beneficiaries Issues of particular interest during the current piloting of participatory methodologies concern 'who' participates and to what degree, as well as what types of interventions require participatory methodologies

It is noted in the case study that performance monitoring and programme evaluations are complementary functions both aimed at improving organisational performance Performance

[3] CIDE has been approached by the Chilean state It has also been approached to support activities in El Salvador Paraguay Bolivia and Uruguay

measurement plays a valuable role in monitoring progress towards the achievement of predetermined objectives, indicating what' is happening However, evaluation provides the 'why' and how , the analysis of the causal relationships between project outputs and impact The foundations for this work are the data derived from performance measurement It is intended that evaluations will be undertaken on a more strategic basis, identifying areas of specific interest that would warrant more detailed investigation The case study found that a number of PVOs were already undertaking strategic evaluations in collaboration with partners in academia, international NGOs and the wider PVO community The intention is that this collaborative approach provides both the basis for more comparative work, analysing the relative costs and benefits of alternative approaches, and the technical and financial resources needed to undertake more rigorous, longitudinal studies

It was envisaged by many of the PVOs that monitoring and evaluation will require a mix of methodologies Where the approach and mode of the intervention are more tried and tested, and causal relationships widely understood, more rudimentary methodologies will suffice However, particularly innovative projects and programmes may require more rigorous methodologies if they are to convince governments, donors and other PVOs of their effectiveness and the merits of replication Such an approach would require that monitoring and evaluation plans and costs are adequately integrated into project and programme proposals at the outset

What is perhaps most clear is that an increased stress on performance measurement has forced many organisations to reevaluate their past procedures, giving greater priority to project and programme design Baseline studies have provided the basis for systematically investigating the needs and priorities of beneficiaries and their distribution across socio economic, gender and ethnic groups, an area that has not been given sufficient priority by either donors or PVOs in the past Baselines have also served as an entry point for local participation, as the Andean Rural Health Care approach illustrates (Storms *et al* 1994) It is expected that these will be the ingredients for more informed and appropriate interventions and therefore, that performance measurement will not only provide the forum for more effective evaluations but more effective interventions Time and, perhaps, performance measurement and evaluation, will tell

8 3 4 Cost-effectiveness

Although the cost effectiveness of NGO development projects and programmes has frequently been seen as an issue of interest more to donors than to NGOs, the case studies provide evidence not only of growing interest in the issue but of far more cases of NGOs using, or trying to use, cost-effectiveness approaches as part of the package of tools to measure impact Thus, cost effectiveness has been a long standing issue in the United States a cost effectiveness manual was produced as long ago as 1983 (Nathan and Associates 1983) However the issue has not been confined to the north the Kenyan case study refers to a cost effectiveness manual produced in that country 10 years ago (Brown 1987) The studies also produced evidence of more recent experimentation such as WorldVision UK which goes beyond the simple *cost per beneficiary* to produce a *cost per unit benefit* ratio which incorporates a quantification of benefits (see Box A7 7)

However it is equally important to put these examples into a wider context A recently published study commissioned by the UK's ODA (*Linking Costs and Benefits in NGO Development Projects*) argues that although there is considerable and growing interest in knowing more about cost effectiveness, and a (small) number of NGOs are beginning to focus on different aspects of cost effectiveness work, with some developing specific cost effectiveness indicators, hardly any NGOs undertake cost effectiveness analysis and a large majority do not even regularly collect basic cost information and are unaware of cost effectiveness methods (see Riddell, 1997)

Building on widespread (though by no means universal) support among NGOs to look more closely at ways of undertaking cost effectiveness analysis, the study concludes that at the most general level it ought to be a priority for NGOs to seek to ensure that the development initiatives they fund or implement are undertaken with the objective of achieving the greatest benefit at the least cost In other words, cost-effectiveness ought to be part and parcel of all NGOs *modi operandi* However, it goes on to add that it is not, and will not be, possible (or even helpful) to prescribe or even recommend a universal method for all NGOs of undertaking cost-effectiveness analysis The approach and type of analysis to be undertaken by NGOs will depend upon a range of issues likely to include the following the nature, scale and time frame of the development intervention being appraised or implemented, the relative importance of beneficiary participation the nature, size and resource-skill base of the NGO involved, the time period involved, the level of resources available for undertaking the analysis and last but not least, the purpose of undertaking the cost effectiveness analysis

The study suggests that an NGO's ability to undertake more complex cost effectiveness analysis is likely to be determined by the NGO s skills, abilities and resources to appraise, monitor and evaluate its development work more generally In other words, it becomes less and less helpful to try to isolate debate and discussion about cost-effectiveness from these wider issues This in turn suggests that NGO weaknesses in terms of their inability to undertake cost-effectiveness analysis are more likely to be resolved by addressing *organisational* than *project specific* weaknesses This is because failures to use cost effectiveness approaches are usually symptoms of broader weaknesses within particular organisations Thus it is argued that a narrow concentration on cost effectiveness, including efforts to try to improve the quality of data necessary to conduct cost-effectiveness analysis, will be unlikely to address these deeper and far more important problems The greatest requirements of NGOs are likely to involve initiatives

- to enhance the capability and capacity to understand better the development problems of the communities NGOs choose to work with, including the nature, appropriateness, size, duration, and cost-effectiveness of discrete projects they may wish to implement and promote,
- to strengthen the management, institutional capacity and skills of the NGOs implementing particular projects and programmes,
- to facilitate greater networking of NGOs with like-minded organisations, especially NGOs of similar size and capabilities and working in the same sectors or with the same methods and
- to strengthen internal learning systems within those organisations

It is argued that a useful way of focusing more precisely on different methods and approaches to cost effectiveness that particular NGOs might use is to cluster NGO development initiatives along a continuum of different types of interventions At one extreme would be grouped NGO initiatives and interventions which are carried out among beneficiaries in communities with little to no NGO project experience, where it is difficult (and/or costly) to obtain the clear views of the beneficiaries and where these initiatives are undertaken for the reason that they are experimenting with new/different approaches to development in general or in relation to particular sectoral goals These are likely to be innovative interventions and could be expected to be high-risk initiatives

At the other extreme would be clustered NGO interventions undertaken with beneficiaries and within communities which have had long experience with NGOs Here the needs of the beneficiaries are clear and non conflictual, and the justification and purpose of intervention lie more in meeting the core needs of people which would otherwise not be met, predominantly using 'tried and tested , rather then new or different, methods and approaches It is for this (second) cluster of initiatives that one would expect NGOs to make use of (as well as to contribute data and information to) particular

and focused cost-effectiveness methods, usually at the *project level*, making use of both 'tried and tested' indicators of performance and cost analysis based on accumulated knowledge of previous methods and approaches These sorts of interventions would be likely to include simple service delivery projects, replicating similar initiatives executed in the same country or by the same or similar types of NGO They would also include more technical credit, enterprise or economically focused development projects interventions whose *raison d etre* and purpose lie in bringing specific economic benefits (including skills) to the beneficiaries, again using techniques and approaches which have been tried and have achieved some success

Finally, it is suggested that NGOs be encouraged to tap into wider (non project specific) networks and databases which provide information on cost-effectiveness methods and indicators This is likely to be of greatest practical importance for those clusters of projects and programmes which involve replicating service delivery initiatives and those involved in more narrow enterprise and financial service delivery

8 3 5 Institutional assessments

The main conclusion of the cost effectiveness study, namely that the best way to enhance the cost-effectiveness of projects is to focus on ways to enhance organisational strengths, has far wider applicability Indeed, another area where there would appear to be increasing common ground between some donors and many NGOs is in growing agreement over the need to move away from an exclusive focus on projects to a wider focus which looks at the institutional capacities of the NGOs implementing specific projects This comes out most strongly in the Netherlands and Norwegian case studies where the respective donors are encouraging an array of non-project assessments – programme assessments, organisational assessments, joint programme evaluations, country programme and country assessments These case studies are consistent with the initiatives of other donors, such as Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom which have undertaken capacity assessments of NGOs and NGO umbrella organisations, frequently as a prerequisite for receiving block grant funds In the United States, the interest in institutional development occurred somewhat earlier and has developed significantly 'institutional development with third world affiliate organisations increasingly is becoming a significant component of US PVO activities' (Bureau for Food For Peace and Voluntary Assistance, 1989)

The issue that this chapter is trying to illuminate is the approach used to assess and evaluate these institutional and capacity building initiatives The country case studies provide some (but not much) data on methods An exception is the approach used by Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) to assess its institutional development programmes in East Africa This lists the following four objectives and indicators

Objective 1	All staff members of NCA partners have a common understanding of their own organisation s vision and mission
Indicator	Number of partners where the organisation s vision and mission statements can be articulated and explained by any staff member of the organisation
Objective 2	Partnership development common understanding is established between NCA and partners regarding focus, priorities, rights and obligations for the partnership
Indicator	Number of partners with a Letter of Understanding with NCA which explains the above qualities

Objective 3	Leadership and management skills partners have developed professional and contextual competencies in leadership and management
Indicator	Observable leadership and management progress in the partner organisations
Objective 4	Local resources mobilisation increase in the partner organisation's financial resource base
Indicator	Level of reduced dependency on external funding for incurred costs

These indicators share a strong subjective element with the first United States' donor-commissioned study (Barclay *et al* 1979) One way to try to reduce this would be to increase the number of indicators and link their progress to more objective achievements An extreme case where this has been tried is the health sector umbrella type NGO initiative, the Bangladesh Population and Health Consortium (BPHC) NGO project which has developed some 100 different indicators with which to assess progress in the NGOs supported in terms of institutional strengthening A recent assessment of this approach concluded that the system was cumbersome and overly focused on an administrative or implementation view of management in which a capacity built NGO is one which can acquire donor funds use them to meet goals and account for them Thus, the indicators used were judged to be very mechanical (see Shepherd, 1996)

Though the present Study has focused more on project assessments and methods than on institutional assessments and methods used, the same generalisation can be made, namely that the institutional assessments reviewed fail to explain what methods they used to assess performance, notwithstanding the listing of a few indicators in some studies The European Commission study *Evaluation of EEC–NGO Cofinancing in relation to Institutional Support for Grassroots Organisations in Developing Countries* (de Crombrugghe *et al* , 1993) focused particularly on financial issues, not least on why the funds available were under-utilised and tended to fund recurrent costs rather than institutional strengthening [4]

The EC study makes reference to 10 indicators drawn up in an INTRAC study for Africa, but cautions against their transference to Africa because of their roots in western models (Fowler, Campbell and Pratt, 1992) They are

- the operational mode or mode of intervention of the NGO, that is the way in which the NGO proceeds to realise its development intentions,
- general administration,
- the funding of the organisation,
- financial management,
- internal communication,
- the form in which decisions are made,
- personnel management,
- the way in which a sense of responsibility is inculcated into the executives as a whole,
- the degree to which the environment and context are taken into account,
- methods of follow-up/scheduling/evaluation

If it is difficult to assess the capacity building and institutional development initiatives of NGOs, then the United States 1989 publication *Accelerating Institutional Development* (Bureau for Food

[4] Four points were assessed during the mission activities undertaken by the organisation its institutional functioning the reinforcement of its autonomy and its financial viability and its relations with the northern NGO (page 4)

For Peace and Voluntary Assistance, 1989) helps to explain the difficulties encountered It is a synthesis of 28 organisations in 18 countries where assistance was focused on institutional strengthening The difficulties appear to lie predominantly in the more open ended and process approaches to institutional development an open-ended sort of institutional development in which each local programme develops more or less in its own way, pursuing a pattern that cannot be specified in advance (page 10)

A more recent – and still quite rare – synthesis study of capacity building in Africa focused narrowly on natural resources management (Brown 1996) The purpose of this synthesis was to assess whether capacity had been enhanced through project training, technical assistance and information support activities The methods adopted are of particular interest as the projects to be assessed suffered from the familiar weaknesses of lack of baseline data and project complexity The approach used was also open-ended, subjective and not aimed at rigorously demonstrating 'anything particular about the project' It used '*ex post facto non-experimental* designs emphasising changes at the cognitive level (attitudes and knowledge) translated into changes at the behavioral level as measured by "expert" judgements consistent with social science methods of evaluating the impact of training activities' (page 10) The method involved assessing the extent to which eight hypotheses linked to capacity-building had, or had not, been confirmed [5]

Two findings from this study in particular are relevant to the current discussion The first is that NGO capacity is generally weak across Africa and the second is that the limited capacities of many NGOs not only impede the achievement of project objectives (in this case national resources management) but they also impede capacity building initiatives, especially those grounded in rapid empowerment and bottom up approaches In other words, the shift to a greater focus on institution and capacity building would appear to be the correct decision to take What is particularly interesting about the study's conclusions is that they, too, strike a strong resonance with the conclusions of the cost effectiveness study, namely that

> *better monitoring and evaluation would improve implementation of capacity building and Natural Resources Management initiatives as well as make it possible to measure progress more accurately* (page 51)

8 3 6 Networking and collaboration

A final set of issues raised in the country studies concerns the importance of networking among NGOs in order to learn more about evaluation methods and approaches A number of specific points are raised Firstly, there is a consistent and wide consensus that networking, especially networking to know more about evaluation methods, is desired by both NGOs in the north and NGOs in the south Second, and relatedly, knowledge of new methods and evaluation approaches appears to have been discovered by NGOs from a wide variety of contacts by southern NGOs from other southern NGOs, by southern NGOs from northern NGOs by northern NGOs from southern NGOs and by both northern and southern NGOs from research centres A particularly rich exchange takes place across particular networks religious based (denominational) networks covering northern and southern NGOs work well as do similar networks across northern countries in particular NGOs do not often claim to have learnt much about evaluation methods from donors though as noted, they use many

[5] It is not necessary to list all these hypotheses here However the first was that the structure of national consortia and regional chapters contributed to strengthening NGO capacity a second that training programmes did contribute a third that bottom up approaches were significant

similar techniques and approaches Similarly there seems to be little flow of information back from NGOs to donors which is certainly regrettable given this Report s assessment that there may well be more experimentation going on across the NGO communities in terms of trying to develop qualitative techniques than between and amongst donors Another significant finding (revealed by the absence of data) is that the greatest gap in networking and in lessons learnt appears to lie between small NGOs and CBOs and larger NGOs and that gaps appear to be greater between small and larger NGOs than between larger and medium sized NGOs across the north/south divide Another conclusion is that although networking is clearly seen as advantageous to learning more about evaluation it appears to be more the exception than the rule A number of country studies such as the Kenyan one commented on the lack of sharing of information about methods

The northern case studies provide a clearer picture of the need for more information on evaluation methods however the exchange of information between NGOs is mixed At one extreme is the UK experience which has established an evaluation network REMAPP though this seems to be far better at providing information across the largest British NGOs than across the smaller ones More widespread is the complaint that networking is difficult Certainly large gaps remain and they often tend to be in the areas where NGOs feel they either have most to contribute or most to learn especially in relation to participatory evaluation and learning processes This certainly explains why Oxfam UK/I and Novib felt the need to go and find out what was happening in different regions of the world One success that this project had was to be one of very few examples of NGOs bridging the French/English language gap

The Kenyan United States and British studies confirm that networking has been particularly strong in relation to some sectoral initiatives information and exchanges in relation to indicators, for instance take place regularly and quickly across countries and across continents One reason for this is certainly that donors have funded the establishment of networks such as SEEP in the United States which in turn have linked into and helped build research and evaluation capacities in these areas which have been spread out and utilised across countries and across continents

Networking links directly to learning The impression gained in Chilean interviews was that there had been little progress to date in institutionalising impact oriented evaluation and learning among NGOs There are exceptions though One instance of an NGO with a long commitment to institutionalising learning and evaluation is that of CIDE which has been able to invest in developing this capacity because it has received generously flexible institutional funding which it has been able to use to finance evaluation and research (it sees little or no difference between the two activities)

Many NGOs do not have such flexible funding and so are less able to do this and donors are generally not interested in supporting these types of units inside NGOs even when in the same breath they demand more learning and impact orientation – a conclusion confirmed from a number of the country case studies Indeed even CIDE in Chile has recently found its institutional funding falling back and has had to reduce the size of its research and evaluation unit

Part D

LESSONS LEARNT, RECOMMENDATIONS AND REACTIONS

Photo UN/Ray Witlin

9

LESSONS LEARNT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

9 1 Introduction

The length of this Report risks giving an unbalanced view of its comprehensiveness Four gaps and weaknesses should be highlighted The first concerns the coverage of developing countries The accompanying volume reports on data gathered from only five southern countries, there are clearly many initiatives going on in other countries which are not incorporated in the analysis It is highly likely that more extensive analysis would lead to a refinement of the different conclusions contained in this chapter The second type of gap relates to the paucity of information gathered from smaller NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) A major reason for this was that, in the majority of cases, it was not possible for the research teams to move beyond the main (urban) centres However, the (little) evidence obtained – much of it from discussions with key individuals – suggests that there is considerable if patchy, evaluation and self-evaluation activity taking place among smaller NGOs, and this clearly needs to be explored further and understood if the aim is to obtain a whole and rounded picture of the impact of *all* NGO development activities

Thirdly, it was realised early on that the Study had a choice of going for either 'spread' or 'depth' and, notwithstanding the point just made about its *lack* of coverage in relation to the potentially available countries and data sources, it chose to veer more towards 'spread', attempting to cover quite a large number of countries The main reason for this approach was to try to embrace as much material as possible in order to make a more informed judgement about potential future studies, their scope and direction The main weakness likely to arise was that studies would be read without sufficient understanding of the context and without sufficient knowledge of whether the NGOs whose development interventions were being assessed were in agreement with the judgements made, and if not, precisely why not Fourthly, and relatedly, though the Study was built on experiences in 12 different countries, it is likely that a trawl of data and experiences from other countries, such as Canada, Japan, Italy and Ireland from the donor/northern side and from countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Trinidad and Jamaica, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali and South Africa from the south, would produce additional data and information to enrich the findings of this Report However, it should also be pointed out that this particular exercise was never intended to be the last word on the linked issues of the impact of NGO development interventions and the methods and approaches used It was to be based predominantly on evaluation material the Study has confirmed the initial view that there are other initiatives and other literatures which throw light on both impact and the development of methods well beyond the confines of evaluation studies

Nevertheless the tentativeness of some of the conclusions drawn need to be placed alongside the initial feed back obtained Thus, following the publication of the draft final report (in May 1997) there was a period of over six months (to the beginning of November) during which time the report was read and discussed in a range of different fora (see **Chapter 9** for details) and, in broad terms, the analysis and conclusions of the Study were confirmed

These introductory remarks provide the overall framework for the more detailed comments made in this chapter Its main purpose is not so much to make firm and comprehensive conclusions, as it was the overriding thrust of the main sections of the Report, Parts B and C, to provide conclusions on impact and methods based on the syntheses of the different issues covered Rather, the purpose is to draw together

the conclusions, some quite tentative emerging from these different syntheses in order to highlight lessons learnt and, in some cases, to make some specific recommendations As the discussion in the chapter shows, the issues addressed cover quite a wide range of themes across a number of different areas

9 2 Dangers of generalising

Over time, official aid has been required to expand into new and different areas – shifting between project and programme aid, and focusing on different activities and different sectors Increasingly, donors have become wary of studies which attempt to aggregate all aid from all countries and make generalisations about its impact Relatedly, as aid has expanded into different areas, focusing often quite narrowly on undertaking different tasks, it is well recognised that the methods and tools used to assess the impact of these interventions varies and needs to do so

If there is caution about generalising in relation to official aid, this Study confirms the need to be equally – if not more – cautious about making generalisations concerning NGO development activities NGOs engage in development activities at many levels, undertaking different types of activity with different purposes, time frames and expectations Clearly, not all NGOs are involved in discrete projects targeted at specific groups of poor people Indeed, while it is likely that this type of engagement still forms a major part of many NGOs' activities, the relationship between many northern and southern NGOs is changing fast influencing the importance attached to discrete projects and their evaluation Increasingly, the purpose of northern and donor interventions with southern NGOs is to help to strengthen the institutions which work with poorer groups A first conclusion to be drawn is that one needs to be cautious about assuming that NGO development interventions *should* be judged in relation to changes in the living standards of the beneficiaries in some cases there are no clear beneficiaries, while in others the purpose of the project funded was not to enhance and improve living standards directly

But the problems about generalising are likely to be even more profound than this As noted in **Chapter 7**, many donor sponsored studies were commissioned in the hope that the conclusions drawn from the sample of projects selected would provide the basis for making generalisations beyond these projects about the impact of NGO development interventions In contrast, most of the commissioned studies conclude by cautioning against making such generalisations

Nevertheless, one of the interesting outputs of the Study is the assembling and clustering of evidence about impact Chapters 3 and 4, in particular, both comment on and provide evidence on a wide range of issues, even if the discussion continually warns that many of the conclusions drawn are based on flimsy evidence, some of which is consistent and quite firm, some contradictory What need to be highlighted here are the potential dangers of misusing this (firm and consistent) data and information, especially by generalising willy-nilly beyond the data presented

Thus, this Study reinforces the view that it is dangerous to make generalisations about NGOs and about different projects or types of project which work, even when focusing on the more traditional discrete project approach There are three reasons for caution

- The first is that, in parallel with recent studies on the impact of official aid (see Dollar and Burnside, 1996) this Study confirms that one of the most profound influences on impact is the wider context within which projects are placed Thus, what works or fails in one context (place *or* time) will not necessarily work or fail in another

- The second reason for caution is that project performance is usually profoundly influenced by the capacity and capabilities of the organisation implementing the project and by the amount and duration of the funds available This provides another reason for needing to seek explanations of project performance 'beyond the project'

- Thirdly, while many projects addressing problems of poverty may *look* alike and have similar objectives in terms of trying to alleviate or eliminate the poverty of particular groups of people, they can be designed with different expectations For instance, it would be mistaken to compare, and judge one project which tries to improve the health status of women using tried and tested methods with another which is experimenting with new approaches in the hope of potential replication and scaling up This reinforces, again, the view that it is too simplistic to judge NGOs simply on the basis of results achieved often one needs to dig deeper

These perspectives lead one to make four generalisations Firstly (to the delight of philosophers), that it is dangerous to make generalisations Secondly, that context matters Thirdly, that agents and organisations implementing projects matter, and fourthly, that in coming to judgement and deriving policy conclusions from the evidence, purpose and expectations matter

There is, however, an important distinction between arguing that it is dangerous to make generalisations and arguing that everything is unique and as a result, no lessons (or very few) can be learnt from examining projects or groups of projects Clearly, as the review of evaluation reports makes clear, there are poor-performing NGOs achieving limited success where many of the causes of such performance lie in reasons which are subject to influence What is more, a particularly interesting aspect of the analysis presented in **Chapter 3** concerned the identification of not only some general trends, but also exceptions to most generalisations Thus, many NGO projects fail to reach down to very poor people – but a number do, many are not financially sustainable – but a number are, many fail to address structural factors impeding the advancement of women – but a number do, and so on This suggests that caution needs to be exercised in making hard and fast generalisations even when most of the evidence points in a particular direction

Finally, however, it is important to note that a number of the donor-commissioned studies, drawing on very different samples of NGO interventions in different countries and in different contexts, came to some similar types of conclusions some strikingly similar about impact (and about the paucity of data with which to draw firm conclusions) The more that future studies, undertaken by both NGOs and external evaluators, reinforce these conclusions the more sure one can be about the wider applicability of the conclusions drawn

9 3 Ignorance and the need to improve access to knowledge

The Study has shown that access to knowledge is an issue of major significance and importance, manifested in distinct though linked ways Firstly, there is widespread ignorance about activities and studies including evaluation studies which are going on or have been completed Large data and information gaps exist across and sometimes within many organisations and institutions Thus there is ignorance within donor agencies of all the work which has been done or is being done on NGOs which sheds light on impact and impact methods There is ignorance within donor agencies of what northern NGOs are doing There is ignorance across the north of many initiatives which southern NGOs are undertaking, and ignorance of the content of southern reports written and not sent to the north There is ignorance within smaller NGOs about debates and discussions on evaluation methods going on in larger organisations While networks and information flows have been expanding across different NGOs they still tend to be clustered among like minded NGOs or within specialist NGOs engaged in specific, and

often narrow, types of development intervention there is frequently ignorance of what is happening in other networks and beyond There is ignorance across donors and intermediary NGOs of self evaluations taking place, greater ignorance if these self evaluations are oral exercises Finally, there is ignorance and often lack of interest in information 'out there' which might inform wider development interests 'back home' For example, ignorance among donors of what NGOs are doing in the area of NGO evaluation not only means that donors are less than fully informed about NGO impact than they need be, but they are also often failing to use the information 'out there' to learn lessons which could be useful to their work outside the direct field of NGO work

Secondly, not only is the existence of these data gaps itself a contributory factor to the duplication and replication of activities and the perpetuation of poor practice, but the failure to interact and pool knowledge is also a major impediment to both the enhancement of knowledge about impact, and the development of methods and approaches which work [1] This is because research and investigation into methods which work carry with them a certain momentum, the knowledge that others are involved in a common enterprise stimulates additional interest and is likely to reduce the overall time to achieve some sort of significant breakthroughs

One result of donor ignorance is that many within donor agencies are unaware of both the interest in evaluation and the wider range of evaluation activities which NGOs in the north and south are currently undertaking If there was a belief in donor circles that the main body of evaluation work on NGO development interventions consists of donor-commissioned studies, then one of the results of this Study should be to dispel that belief The reason for highlighting ignorance and data gaps is simply that knowledge matters Consequently, the thrust of this Study is to recommend that urgent steps are taken to enhance knowledge and information exchange among the range of different stakeholders What is more, in most areas there is a need to enhance data flows in a *two way direction* Thus, donors need to know more about NGO activities and NGOs need to know more about donor activities, northern NGOs need to know more about southern NGO activities and southern NGOs more about northern NGO activities, there needs to be a better two-way flow of information between researchers and NGOs, as, too, between researchers and donors

In short, there is a pressing need to expand and create a more reliable and comprehensive database of evaluations which have been carried out (by donors and NGOs), of research and related activities which throw further light on impact, and of major initiatives to address gaps in methods of evaluating impact, including results achieved As **Chapter 4** illustrates, significant amounts of information can now be accessed by a judicious use of the internet, a source whose importance is bound to continue to increase Overall, there is a need

- for donors and especially large northern NGOs to enhance their internal data capture mechanisms,
- for donors to enhance their knowledge of what both northern and southern NGOs are doing in the areas of impact and impact methods, not only to identify gaps and deepen their appreciation of current and planned activities, but also in order to feed the information and insight more widely into their own agencies,

[1] The term methods and approaches which work is used deliberately instead of a term like new ideas What is important is to develop and broadcast methods which work many of which may well be old ideas or ideas linked to traditional methods Discussions suggest that there is a certain drive to experiment with approaches that are new but which may well be inappropriate

- for northern and southern NGOs to know more about activities beyond their own organisation or more traditional networks,

- for donors and larger northern and southern NGOs to know more about the impact of smaller NGO and CBO activities and the methods they use to assess their own activities,

- for donors and larger northern and southern NGOs to use their greater power and influence to ensure that data and information is packaged up in forms useful to smaller organisations and communicated 'downwards' in a manner which encourages mutual learning and not domination

The main ways in which donors can address some of these data gaps are firstly, by acknowledging the importance of networking and secondly, by providing funds either for new networks or the careful expansion of existing ones While, ideally, there is merit in addressing all data gaps, priority ought to be given to using donor funds to bridge particularly important data gaps and to encourage networking where there is currently a particularly severe lack of funds, and where information exchange can be enhanced most cost-effectively Based on these principles, an initial suggestion would be for donors (and northern NGOs) to give particularly priority to bridging information gaps in two areas between larger and smaller organisations, and in relation to increasing knowledge of methods and approaches and conclusions of self evaluation exercises For their part, and additionally, it is apparent that donors would benefit both from enhancing information flows within their own countries and exchanging this information between themselves

9 4 Enhancing impact

Important though it is to know more about impact studies which have been carried out, the Study shows that on its own, improving the evaluation database would be an insufficient response There is an additional need to enhance and improve the *quality* of the data a repeated and consistent conclusion drawn across countries and in relation to all clusters of studies is that the data are exceptionally poor There is a paucity of data and information from which to draw firm conclusions about the impact of projects, about efficiency and effectiveness, about sustainability, the gender and environmental impact of projects and their contribution to strengthening democratic forces, institutions and organisations and building civil society There is even less firm data with which to assess the impact of NGO development interventions beyond discrete projects, not least those involved in building and strengthening institutional capacity, a form of development intervention whose incidence and popularity have grown rapidly in the last five years

Within this overall context, there are notable sub sectoral and thematic differences Thus, impact data tend to be better in relation to interventions clustered around more economic-type projects (credit, saving, income generation) They tend to be worst the closer one moves to the part of development where objectives and purposes are less tangible, such as building capacity and democracy, or empowerment and advocacy work, and the more the development intervention concerned focuses on processes and issues such as reducing vulnerability to risk Between these two extremes lie social sector development projects Those involved in delivering services where there are more tangible purposes such as providing clean water schooling or clinic facilities, usually produce firmer impact data than those involved in areas such as training increasing health awareness or improving the quality of services

These differences are important because they go beyond some more immediate gaps and causes of gaps in data Thus, on the one hand, poor impact data are due to the absence, or poor quality, of appraisal, monitoring and data-gathering In such cases, some, perhaps major, improvements in methods and processes would certainly help to enhance knowledge Yet, on the other hand, it is clear that a major

additional cause of data gaps and the lack of firm data with which to judge impact lies in the nature of the development intervention, the difficulty of agreeing and deriving firm indicators with which to judge impact, and the importance of qualitative processes

What is particularly interesting about the data and information reviewed for this Study is that most attention would appear to be focused on trying to address the latter cluster of issues, not least by discussing and testing the use of different indicators with which to assess and judge the impact of the less tangible types of development intervention Least attention would appear to be focused on the project appraisal, planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME) end, and on initiatives to encourage NGOs to introduce a more systematic and ongoing appraisal and monitoring system Clearly both are needed, and NGOs and donors need to work together in networks and, in some cases, on their own to try to improve the quality of data However, as noted in §9 2 above, it is additionally necessary to pool far more information about what is done and what is planned in order to focus efforts, build momentum, and ensure that current waste and duplication are minimised In short, it is **necessary** to focus attention **beyond** evaluation, to planning and monitoring, and addressing data and information gaps here, including ways of introducing (appropriate) base-lines if information on impact is to be qualitatively improved

Important though it is to focus on improving the quality of data with which to try to assess impact, the studies reviewed also show that on their own enhancing the processes of PME and moving to a closer consensus on what indicators are useful in assessing different types of project will not automatically lead to better impact False expectations must not be built up if they are, they increase the risk of retreat from support for the (major) developments in impact assessment which have occurred to date

Thus, impact assessment is a means of judging projects or other forms of intervention Improving the *means and methods of judging whether the project s immediate purpose or wider impact have been achieved* is different from *improving the chances of the project s purpose itself being achieved more rapidly*, more firmly, more durably, or more efficiently and effectively As the analysis of causes of project success and failure in **Chapter 3** (Box 3 3) suggest, projects can be enhanced, in part by focusing on factors which are potentially open to manipulation such as staff quality, beneficiary consultation and participation, management quality and ensuring sufficient funds But other factors – such as a range of external factors (sector and type of intervention, geographical area, location, attitudes of elites, whether the national or local economies are expanding, contracting or stagnant) – are far less amenable to influence Notwithstanding the importance of this distinction it is of more than passing interest that a number of the country studies suggest that there may well be a closer relationship between working to enhance the quality of impact evaluations and achieving project objectives and wider impact than might initially be thought A main argument here is that NGOs which are conscious of the need to assess in a more rigorous manner the results of their development efforts tend also to be increasingly interested in analysing, addressing and trying to reduce those factors identified as weaknesses In other words, there may be a stronger albeit indirect link between working to improve the quality of impact data and project performance To the extent that this link continues to be confirmed it provides yet another reason to justify the growing interest of both donors and NGOs in impact, and in promoting better ways of assessing it

This leads to a related question for what purpose is impact data being improved? The studies reviewed juxtapose two sharply different answers to assure donors that the funds allocated have been used effectively and to feed back into and improve performance in the future However they also suggest that there are wider differences in terms of rhetoric than there are differences in practice though certainly not to the extent of arguing that identical ways of assessing impact are used and ought to be used to satisfy external funders, implementing organisations and beneficiaries The discussion in §9 6 below, confirming a view, interestingly that was articulated more strongly by southern than by northern NGOs,

suggests that there are valid and legitimate reasons for undertaking impact assessments for different stakeholders What is of interest here is that external stakeholders are usually keener advocates of using more quantitative and externally verifiable indicators with which to judge impact, whereas internal stakeholders, be they staff from the NGO implementing the project or the ultimate beneficiaries, are usually keener to use indicators which are in some senses 'owned' by them, even if they are not easily verified externally Thus, if, as this Study suggests, there is donor support for funds to be focused increasingly on ensuring that NGOs have the capacity to undertake evaluations *for themselves*, this would tend to suggest that a greater push should be made to encourage analysis of the processes which lead to greater ownership of home-grown indicators (even if they are identical to indicators grown in many other homes) This would be more important than trying to develop firmer clusters of quantitative and externally-verifiable indicators [2]

9 5 Enhancing methods

If one of the main conclusions of this Study is that we are still searching for more information and higher quality data with which to assess impact, a second is that we are still searching for methods and tools with which to assess NGO development interventions Indeed, to the extent that recent trends continue, we need to search for quite a wide range of different methods and tools with which to assess often quite different types of development intervention discrete time bound projects, longer-term processes, institutional and capacity building initiatives, advocacy, educational and awareness-building activities, efforts to strengthen (in some cases to create) civil society organisations, and NGO activities which involve more overt attempts to create and strengthen democratic institutions and/or to try to halt the erosion of democratic processes *Within* each of these broad categories there are further groups and clusters of development interventions which usually require different types of approach

If all this sounds daunting, it needs to be placed in a broader perspective Two points need to be made The first is that the lack of firm and reliable methods and tools with which to assess the impact of NGO development interventions which this Study has found, is not a particularly new finding it largely confirms what those at the coalface already know Secondly, these gaps and weaknesses in methods are by no means confined to NGOs in moving beyond traditional/orthodox social cost-benefit analysis, donors concerned with the 'softer' end of official aid as well as agencies involved in assessing social and political initiatives within the industrialised countries face exactly the same types of problems Thus, it is not that evaluations of NGO development, and especially social and human development, projects are particularly weak, the problems experienced in evaluating NGO development interventions are part of a far larger set of problems [3]

In this context, the Study's findings could be viewed not so much with gloom but with a considerable dose of optimism in that a number of the country studies not only argue that the NGO evaluation field is rich with a rapidly expanding range of different initiatives to try and test a range of different approaches and tools, but there are at least suggestions that the combined activities within the NGO sector may well involve a larger number of initiatives than are to be found within donor agencies The fact that it is not possible to provide a firm assessment on *this* question points to the first lesson to be learnt from the Study in terms of methodology This is the need for donors to interact far more closely with NGOs than many appear to do at present this is to achieve a better *two-way* information and ideas-

[2] This conclusion is one which focuses on relative balance It is certainly not being argued that NGOs should abandon attempts to try to develop and use objective indicators Clearly many NGOs are not only working on such issues but find the exercise useful and rewarding

[3] See Moore *et al* (1995) for a discussion of major gaps in institution building projects and programmes

flow between the two – donors need to know more about and provide encouragement where they can to NGO initiatives, while NGOs need to be kept abreast of ideas, debates and experiments on methods occurring within donor agencies It is important that this contact is not confined to donors' evaluation departments It needs to involve close interaction with donors' cross-cutting departments (social development, gender, environment and economics) as well as the full range of sectoral expertise small business/micro enterprise, health, education, good governance, and so on Knowing about methods extends well beyond the donor–northern NGO relationship It is clearly important for the two way information flow to extend downwards and upwards to different NGOs and community-based organisations

A second lesson on methods that comes from the Study is confirmation of the interest of NGOs in the issues of methods and tools of analysis As this undoubtedly coincides with donor interests, there are grounds for arguing that donors should continue to encourage NGOs to experiment in devising better/sharper tools of analysis It is beyond the scope of this Study to go into all the different aspects of methods and methodology However, the studies do highlight a number of themes where it would appear to be particularly important to encourage more work on methods In no particular order of preference or priority, these are some preliminary 'first thoughts' on specific areas where additional work would be particularly helpful

- Work to clarify the (differing) role of the beneficiaries in evaluation vis-a vis those of other stakeholders, and the interrelationship between beneficiary participation in projects and beneficiary participation in evaluation

- Encouragement to examine rigorously the whole area of methods of assessing non project development interventions, not least those focused on capacity-building, advocacy and development education This work ought to have the discussion of suitable indicators as a major focus

- Building on the verification approaches outlined in **Chapter 3**, it would be useful to encourage further work, especially in areas outside a narrow project-specific focus, which tries to isolate the areas of impact in which there is likelihood of agreement and disagreement about impact The Australian and Canadian donor commissioned studies focused narrowly on differences between the respective donor and northern NGOs It would be useful to extend the parameters to include the whole range of different stakeholders

- Work focused on testing the view (hypothesis) emerging in this Study that there often seems to be a tension between achieving sustainability and reaching the poor (see §9 8, below)

- Work focused on the development of relatively simple and practical methods adapted to (different) NGO development interventions in order to assess these against major cross cutting issues such as gender and the environment

- Work focused on methods to evaluate the development interventions of small NGO initiatives (see §9 7 for a discussion of why this is important)

- Work focused on the whole issue of partnership, specifically here in relation to how this influences and is influenced by methods of assessing impact

9 6 External and internal evaluations

Many NGOs are now focusing their attention on evaluation, though it is probably not yet common practice for most NGOs to plan evaluation strategies and undertake evaluations systematically Evaluation appears to be particularly weak among smaller NGOs, though this view could be coloured by the relative paucity of information this Study was able to gather about evaluations among smaller NGOs There is no evidence to suggest that NGOs are spending too much on evaluations though figures are difficult to obtain, the overall conclusion from the Norwegian and Netherlands studies was that NGO evaluations constituted no more than 4 to 5 per cent of total project costs Some donors, such as Denmark and Finland, regularly provide funds for NGOs to undertake evaluations, though on occasions only when asked, others, most notably the United States, have insisted that all NGO projects be evaluated externally, though there are now moves to abandon the all embracing nature of this requirement France contributes some 2 5 per cent of the co financing budget to a trust fund involved in appraisal and evaluation

It is the view of this Study that the noticeable shift towards increased interest in evaluation and evaluation methods should be further encouraged The broad question we wish to address here is the relationship between NGOs and donors in relation to encouraging the practice of evaluation Three narrower questions concern, firstly, the balance between external and internal evaluations, secondly, the balance between evaluations commissioned and/or undertaken by donors and evaluations undertaken by NGOs and thirdly the balance between project evaluations and others, such as programme, country and institutional evaluations

The evidence emerging from this Study would tend to support the view that it is unhelpful to make sweeping generalisations about the merits of external and self-evaluation there is a clear role for both sorts of evaluation In that context, however, two additional points can be made The first is that donors should tread cautiously in commissioning more overarching evaluations of NGOs 'in general' The second is that while this might suggest donors commissioning more narrowly-focused, thematic or sectoral evaluations, there seems to be greater merit in following the broad donor consensus of commissioning NGOs themselves to undertake these studies – providing the results are shared In some countries, like the United Kingdom, the sharing of thematic evaluations and their conclusions seems to be exceptionally poor Thirdly, when and if donors do commission external consultants to undertake external evaluations, particular note should be taken of requests that the evaluators share their skills with project implementing staff, and that results are shared and discussed

These donor efforts, however, need to be put into context The thrust of this Study suggests that donors ought to focus far more of their attention on encouraging NGOs to undertake their own evaluations (which they are doing), encouraging them to broadcast these results more widely (which still seems to be a problem) and encouraging them to analyse and share with other NGOs their practical experiences in explaining precisely how the lessons from evaluations can be integrated into their planning processes (a process about which many larger NGOs especially are increasingly eager to learn) This approach is wholly consistent with the emerging perspective of USAID, namely that it is more important to ensure that NGOs are able and have the skills to evaluate the impact of what they doing than it is for USAID to contract in skills to do this for them The French *Foundation de France* also works from this perspective

It is also important, however, for donors not to encourage the further use of evaluations, or self evaluations as isolated exercises Undertaking more and more detailed evaluations without addressing data gaps and without more rigorous planning, appraisal and monitoring is, perversely likely to encourage the misguided (and magical) view that going through a mechanistic evaluation process will automatically lead to improved projects

This still leaves open the question of what sort of interventions should be evaluated discrete projects, longer term processes institutional assessments, country or programme evaluations? It is fairly simple to answer the question of the balance between project and institutional evaluations and assessments the *evaluation* carried out should be a reflection of the types of *development intervention* undertaken It would certainly be odd if the noted shift of many northern NGOs towards a far greater focus of their activities on capacity building were accompanied by donors continuing with an exclusive focus on the impact of discrete projects targeted at particular beneficiaries While at one level this has clearly not occurred, at another, there is some sense across a number of northern countries that it is still necessary to continue to focus predominantly on project evaluation In contrast this Study has shown both that capacity building activities have expanded rapidly across a large number of NGOs and that if the methods of evaluating projects are still in their youth rather than adulthood, the methods of evaluating the capacity-building initiatives of NGOs are still in their infancy What this suggests is that a greater emphasis on capacity-building evaluations and work to encourage a better understanding of how these might be done would be particularly worthwhile

A number of donors such as the Netherlands, have now begun to undertake country assessments as part of their medium and long-term programmes, building on the country studies undertaken in the commissioned studies of some donors such as the Swedish, Finnish and British evaluations These studies have proved particularly useful in placing the impact of discrete projects into their wider context and in raising the question of the role of NGOs beyond the project level This might suggest further encouragement to undertake far more of these studies Three notes of caution need to be voiced The first is that there has already been considerable duplication of effort among different donors undertaking country studies, leading in aggregate to an inefficient use of resources The second is that most larger NGOs now regularly undertake country studies for themselves a large proportion of which appears to cover and duplicate the efforts of other NGOs in this area The third is that often absent or marginal to these processes are local NGO inputs What all this suggests is that any expansion in resources allocated to country studies ought to be preceded by a more rigorous trawl of information to ensure that future efforts build on past analysis rather than merely repeat it, and that attention is focused on building capacity in the south to undertake such analyses

The final issue to raise here is the funding of evaluations As noted, many, if not most, donors now provide funds to NGOs to carry out evaluations, in the case of some larger NGOs to supplement funds allocated from own-sources Overall, however, discussions with NGOs suggest that they still remain limited in their ability to carry out evaluations because of lack of funds Perhaps one reason for this has its roots in the fact that evaluations are still predominantly seen as project 'add ons' and not as integral parts of the whole project process This suggests that donors and NGOs alike should consider expanding the funds that they allocate to evaluation providing, as argued above, these are integrated into an enhancement of wider PME efforts

However, if one is talking about priorities there is probably a more urgent need (as funds are even more tight) to focus on expanding the funding of *research* into evaluation methods as well as funding the broadcasting of interesting results But if one is interested in addressing the major gaps very few funds have probably been channelled into encouraging small and medium sized NGOs in the south to undertake evaluations and to experiment with different methods This suggests that funds channelled into these initiatives deserve high priority

9 7 Encouraging evaluation activity among smaller NGOs

It is one thing to help facilitate evaluation among smaller NGOs, it is quite another to discuss what form that evaluation might take The Study has found evidence to indicate that the relative absence of

evaluation among smaller NGOs does not lie simply in a lack of funds or in a lack of knowledge of evaluation methods used, either by donors or by larger NGOs The issue of size is itself of major importance Thus, two reasons for which smaller NGOs do not undertake evaluations are that they do not have the personnel to undertake evaluations and they do not have the funds to undertake evaluations However, perhaps of even greater importance is that if they were to import the methods and approaches used by larger NGOs, the process and scale of the evaluations would dominate, swamp and risk changing the very nature of these NGOs Similar arguments have been mustered in relation to transferring more rigorous appraisal and monitoring methods willy nilly to smaller NGOs

What all this suggests is that it is insufficient and inadequate for northern NGOs and donors to facilitate the movement of money to smaller NGOs to undertake evaluations if this entails the NGOs having to buy into their (evolving) methods as a condition for accepting the funds Equally, however, one also needs to be wary of moving too far in the other direction by suggesting that the projects and programmes of smaller NGOs can be excluded from the rigours of any analysis, for such an approach is akin to arguing that impact does not matter What is needed is activity which takes place somewhere between these two extremes a system of evaluation (monitoring and appraisal) that is sufficiently rigorous to ensure that funds are well used and lessons learnt, but sufficiently simple and small scale to ensure that the tools used are appropriate and do not have a distorting effect

It would appear that we are still very far along the road to achieving these objectives This suggests that larger NGOs and donors need to devote time and resources to cooperating with identified groups of smaller NGOs to undertake a range of experiments which attempt to provide concrete answers to the linked problems of small size, impact assessment and appropriate method Quick answers should not be expected!

9 8 Sustainability issues development versus welfare

The evidence surveyed for this Study points to a number of different sets of conclusions about NGOs and the sustainability of their development interventions

- Donors are focusing more and more on the issue of sustainability, of which the financial sustainability of projects is a major constituent part Indeed, it is increasingly common for donors to provide funds to NGOs on the explicit assumption that the projects funded will be, or have the potential to be, financially sustainable in a relatively short space of time

- NGOs in receipt of donor funds are increasingly accepting funds based on an agreement that the projects they are implementing will achieve these sustainability objectives

- Yet, the evidence from this Study revealed that by far the majority of NGO projects are currently not financially sustainable and that, for most, there is little hope of them being financially sustainable in the near term without external assistance

- A number of donors appear in practice to be satisfied if NGOs receive funds from other donors in order to achieve their own (narrow) financial sustainability requirements

- The overall evidence provides *strong* confirmation of the hypothesis found in the wider literature that there is an inverse relationship between the potential of projects to achieve financial sustainability and the socio economic status of the beneficiaries Some evidence from the micro enterprise sector, often USAID based, suggests that there is no trade-off here, though this is by no means confirmed by other evidence

- The (less firm) sectoral evidence tends to suggest that the potential to achieve financial sustainability is poorer for social welfare type projects and greater for economic and income generating projects

- Some evidence (even more tentative) suggests there may often be a positive link between ability to achieve institutional sustainability and ability to achieve financial sustainability

These are all extremely important conclusions An immediate question is how generalisable they are While this Study cannot provide an answer to this question, what it can do is suggest that these 'conclusions' be taken as hypotheses for further study and analysis

Even before further work is done, however, it would seem that there are grounds for donors to focus on what seems to be a glaring contradiction between the demands made about financial sustainability and the ability of NGOs to achieve financial sustainability especially for groups of poorer people As the discussion of the definition of sustainability in **Chapter 3** (Box 3 2) argued, it is not necessary or even desirable, to abandon the commitment to achieving financial sustainability what is important is to discuss how one links noble objectives with practical realities One of the most crucial issues to address is the extent to which, and the methods by which, donors might acknowledge that there may well be sound reasons to provide assistance to poor people to meet basic and immediate needs when there are few prospects of such assistance continuing when the project ceases For some donors, this is not as radical an idea as it might seem, for discussion is already taking place about providing official aid in such circumstances [4]

9 9 Using and misusing impact data

No one doubts that one of the influences driving donors to focus more on monitoring and evaluation is rooted in the higher priority given to results achieved The increasing concern donors have over the results of NGO development interventions is itself influenced by two reinforcing factors increasing donor funds going to NGOs, and the context where results achieved are increasingly emphasised

As this Study has shown, there is some concern amongst some, though by no means all, NGOs that the emphasis given to results could be overdone and ultimately prove damaging Among NGOs which have embraced the need to assess what they do – and these are the vast majority – there is growing concern that donors and other funders might not merely focus on results in order to see how these might be improved, but might take the additional step of basing funding decisions *on* the results achieved At one level there is nothing wrong with taking such a step it is surely correct to channel funds to NGOs and their projects where tangible gains for the poor are being achieved, in preference to funding NGOs and projects where there is no evident improvement Yet, at another level, and without wishing to challenge that general principle there would be cause for concern if donors were to fund NGOs and their development projects solely on the basis of the results achieved An initial problem is simply that at present the data are often of such poor quality that it is difficult to come to judgement But at a deeper level, and if the data were available, there is a concern that if results achieved were to become the predominant basis for funding this would influence what NGOs do in quite a profound and detrimental way Specifically, it would encourage NGOs to move away from risky, experimental and innovative projects where the results are likely to be uncertain, and away from projects focused on poorer people

[4] A recent guide on appraisal monitoring and impact assessment produced for the ODA s Health and Population Division argued that there are a number of reasons for which Britain should provide services to poor people when they nor anyone else can afford to pay for them See Health and Population Division (HPD) 1996

because the costs are likely to be greater and the prospects of achieving financial sustainability poor What is more as the Australian study indicates, these concerns are by no means confined to NGOs

The Study has been able to do little more than register these concerns, not to assess the validity and importance of such worries However, it would seem desirable for donors and NGOs to get together to examine this issue in some depth, not only in order to unravel competing claims and assertions but in order to help to expand the common ground between donors and NGOs and to reduce potential conflict

9 10 Follow-up

Previous sections of this chapter have identified a range of gaps which need to be filled Thus, and in spite of major changes, there remains a paucity of information on the impact of NGO development interventions there seems to be agreement among donors and NGOs alike that this information should be enhanced in terms of both coverage and quality Additionally, however, information gaps on impact are unlikely to be filled unless more work is done on improving the quality of the data which, in turn, is linked to encouraging and even expanding the current interest in examining new approaches to evaluation

What additionally needs to be addressed is the issue of possible follow-up to this particular Study As noted already, the evidence gathered here needs to be viewed as an initial overview of the key issues The question is whether this initiative – a joint initiative across the donor community – should be followed by further work and if so, what its terms of reference should be

It is the view of the Team that for all this Study's gaps and weaknesses, it would not be wise to commission a follow up study which aimed to obtain more of the same sorts of information, not least by extending and expanding the coverage of the present Study This is not because there is no need to obtain more information on impact and methods there clearly is Rather, it is that the likely conclusions and insights to be obtained from commissioning another *general* study are unlikely to be so markedly different as to warrant the likely costs outlaid, not least because of the poor quality of impact data currently available A second reason is that though there is certainly a need to obtain further information and refine the conclusions drawn, there are limits to what donors, either as a group or individually, can do with such information As the Report notes, there is a danger of trying to use the generalised information obtained to make overarching policy decisions NGOs work in a wide array of different sectors, intervening in different ways and at different levels from grassroots work to international advocacy If the time has not already passed, it is surely fast approaching when it will be inappropriate to ask impact questions about NGOs 'in general'

Additionally, this Study has confirmed that data and information on the impact of NGO development interventions and work on developing appropriate methods come not only from evaluations but also from other sources Most important would appear to be longitudinal in depth research studies a number of which are comparative studies of different interventions in different contexts While the trawl of data for this Study has unearthed some of these studies (see *Appendix 14* for references) it also suggests that there are many other rich sources of data on impact and methods currently available from these sources Consequently it would certainly be a useful complement to this Study to commission a synthesis study focusing explicitly on these non-evaluation studies

What are increasingly needed, however, are studies which to try to isolate those factors which contribute to NGO successes in different sectors and different areas and provide insights into the methods used to assess these What this suggests is a greater focus on narrower studies and a move away from general synthesis studies – useful though the information obtained from such studies clearly still is Thus, there

might be merit in donors individually or as a group commissioning not another overarching synthesis study but perhaps a series of more focused studies which try in far greater depth than has been possible here, not merely to synthesise reports and ongoing work in different areas but also to help stimulate both further work and essential networking – building, of course on work which has already been done in this area, as well as ongoing research and linked initiatives

9 11 Disseminating this Report

In undertaking this Study and especially in discussing it with NGO staff and officials two dominant reactions were forthcoming The first was broad support for the initiative though criticisms were heard about the lack of involvement of NGOs and NGO staff and the timing The second was how the Report would be distributed the Study has clearly attracted considerable interest in both the north and the south Within this broad context other issues need to be addressed One is the language of the Report the main draft final Report was written in English and the appendices were produced in the language in which they were written four country studies in French and the rest in English There we expressed our view that the Report including the country case studies should be made available at least in both French and English and that there should be discussion about further translation into other major international languages Subsequently a decision was made to ensure that the whole of the this Report is made available in both French and English We also urged that the Report be circulated widely among NGOs using current networks and the internet as in initial form of circulation but with the necessity of reviewing ways in which particular groups excluded from exclusively modern telecommunications methods might be reached Relatedly we urged the OECD/DAC Group not merely to encourage feedback on the substance and content of the Report but providing there is sufficient feedback to arrange a more formal interchange of views on the Report by all key stakeholders with possible follow up initiatives As noted in **Chapter 10** this process has already started and by late 1997 a number of key meetings had taken place

10

INITIAL COMMENTS ON THE REPORT

10 1 Introduction

After the April 1997 meeting of the OECD/DAC Expert Group on Aid Evaluation the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland printed and distributed copies of the two volumes of the draft final Report Volume I *The Main Report* (117 pages) and Volume II *The Appendices* (375 pages) to all donors and to many NGOs in the north and south who contributed information to the consultants Additionally the information about the Report was provided in a number of journals and networks such as *Aidwatch* while its distribution was enhanced by its being accessible through the internet (available on http //www valt helsinki fi/ids/ngo)

Building on the recommendations in the draft final Report that feedback be obtained on the conclusions and findings of the Study a series of events took place between May and the beginning of November largely among NGOs A series of domestic meetings took place – in Australia, France the Netherlands Ireland Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States – to obtain the views of different NGOs In Australia the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) invited 19 NGOs to comment and four sets of written comments were received these were synthesised and discussed at two separate meetings together with the views of AusAID s NGO Section In the United States and at the request of USAID, the NGO umbrella InterAction, circulated the Report among its members and collated the comments sent in by different NGOs and PVOs The inputs provided by World Neighbors Latter Day Saint Charities and CARE in particular were noted Feedback from the Netherlands focused mostly on the country case study which was amended in the light of comments received In the case of Switzerland and the United Kingdom these were large one-day events in which staff from most of the largest NGOs participated, in the French case the views of the French international solidarity organisations were obtained [1] These were complemented in early November 1997 by an international conference held in Bergen in Norway, sponsored by the Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs entitled *NGOs in Aid A Re-Appraisal of 35 Years of NGO Assistance* It was attended by representatives of NGOs from both the north and the south, embracing Africa South Asia and Latin America as well as by officials from a number of NGO departments of official donor agencies [2] The final day of this conference was devoted

[1] Thus the UK meeting included staff from ACORD BOND the British Red Cross CAFOD Children s Aid Direct Christian Aid Living Earth Foundation Oxfam UK/I Tear Fund and World Vision However it was stressed by meeting participants that their views did not necessarily represent the institutional views of the organisations for which they work The main Swiss meeting included the largest 15 Swiss NGOs it was followed by a smaller meeting at which the question of whether a special Swiss impact study should be commissioned was discussed opinions were divided The following NGOs were involved Brot fur Alle Caritas Fastenopfer FGC HEKS Helvetas SAH Schweiz Rotes Kreuz Intercooperation Swissaid SKIP Swisscontact Unite Terre des Hommes Terre des Hommes Schweiz Brucke/Cecotret Arbeitsgemeinschaft

[2] Those participating at Bergen included the following NGOs NGO networks and umbrella organisations PENHA (Ethiopia) Save for Children (Norway) F3E (France) Norwegian Peoples Aid The Norwegian Association of the Disabled NORKOP (Norway) Christian Aid (UK) CERFE (Italy) the Norwegian Institute of Human Rights the Strømme Foundation the Swedish Cooperative Movement Norwegian Church Aid FORUT Norway the Icelandic Human Rights Organisation KULU NA – Norway the Swedish Mission Council SSID

exclusively to discussing the Report s findings and recommendations and future options This included a more formal commentary on the Report provided by Dr Fritz Wils of the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, feedback from the Irish and Swiss consultations, and a keynote address by a member of a British NGO, Christian Aid (speaking in his own capacity) The day s events included six group discussions which attempted to address three groups of issues and questions

- Major strengths and weaknesses in NGO evaluations to what extent does the Report present a relevant and adequate picture?
- Future options and challenges for NGO evaluations
- What next how NGO evaluations might be strengthened, and assessment of support for introducing Principles for evaluation of NGO development interventions

The purpose of this chapter is to summarise the main views reactions and opinions from these different events processes and meetings on the Report s content and recommendations and ideas about the future In order to provide a structure to the chapter this summary clusters together the comments into a number of thematic groups However these are not set out in any particular order of importance

10 2 Themes and issues raised

Overall reaction The overall reaction to the Report was very positive in terms of its scope the information provided and the analysis made For instance the general French reaction was broad agreement, though suggestions were made for the Study and follow up Likewise the Australian NGOs found the Report a useful document containing some important insights into NGO approaches to evaluation and consistent with their own findings Put negatively no one questioned the accuracy of the data nor the information provided More positively and of wider interest, the Swiss seminar reported that the Study broadly reflected the Swiss experience even though little information and data from Switzerland were used in the Report s analysis According to Fritz Wils it is a valuable and pretty inclusive document covering many aspects of NGO evaluation the evaluation of NGOs work both by donors and by NGOs themselves In similar vein the InterAction assessment stated that

> *The report is a useful synthesis of current evaluation issues in the NGO community in Europe and North America Reading it helps to place the work of individual organizations within the field and informs us of broader effects and issues We can see where concerns overlap where there are gaps and where the community could benefit from closer coordination with other NGOs (one of the recommendations of the report)*

Likewise contributors to the UK meeting stated they found the Report useful going on to suggest that the Study could itself be used as marker or reference point for other subsequent studies One person argued that the Report s overall conclusions on impact imparted a certain sense of relief' and comfort, knowing that other NGOs had difficulty claiming major successes However another commented that the Study raised more questions than it was able to answer Of the (very few) comments on specific sections the following summarised the views of one of the largest US PVOs

(Dominican Republic) the Grameen Trust (Bangladesh) Bilance (Netherlands) the Norwegian Refugee Council Citizen s Watch (Russia) CBR network (South Asia) Evaluar (Colombia) Save the Children (Eritrea) CRENIENO (India) Save the Children (Nepal) CARE (Norway) the United Nations Association (Norway)

on the US case study (Evaluation Coordinator of CARE)

> *(The US case study) provides a very helpful assessment of the strength limitations and trends of evaluation capacity of US PVOs I have not seen any other study which summarises this as succinctly and as accurately as this excellent paper*

Some comments were made on style and presentation Thus though the InterAction praised it for being well-written' it argued that it was also verbose and repetitive Five ways in which the Report could be strengthened were suggested tighter editing and synthesis, simpler and less bureaucratic language, more definitions of terms used, a clear statement of values and underlying framework of analysis, and more specific examples of evaluation methods used

Comments on the content and findings of the Report As noted above where people or organisations commented on particular issues raised in the Report this met with broad agreement Thus the InterAction synthesis commented broadly on its agreement with many of the findings of the Report, drawing attention to 13 specific points with which the US PVOs who gave feedback on the Report concurred

- the trade-offs between sustainability and poverty reach,
- poor NGO performance on economic issues,
- how the wider context influences outcome,
- the benefits of longitudinal studies, research and sector studies over project evaluation as tools for learning about impact
- the degree to which innovative methodology is being used by smaller southern NGOs,
- the development of useful indicators by US NGOs,
- the importance of tailoring indicators to a specific situation, as opposed to using standardised ones
- the lack of sufficient flexible funding for NGOs to do innovative participatory evaluation work
- the weakness of using participatory evaluation when there has been no participatory appraisal or implementation
- the potential weakness of results oriented evaluation as the narrow focus could undermine innovation and risk,
- the importance of using evaluation as a feedback tool for practitioners not just for donors
- the importance of using evaluation in planning and making it integral to programming,
- the importance of long term commitment and an attention to process as opposed to just short term projects

However some individuals and groups questioned some of the Report s findings though at a more general level For instance one keynote speaker at the Bergen conference asked whether the conclusion that there is a lack of firm and reliable evidence on impact was true – perhaps it was argued this is hiding to be found in places other than evaluation reports such as trip reports and office memoranda More specifically the French comments argued that the Study did not pay sufficient attention to the crucial issue of sustainability The Swiss consultation commented that in Switzerland there is no significant difference between donor initiated and NGO-initiated evaluations and that participatory evaluations are now quite common

Comments on the Terms of Reference given and methods A few general comments were directed to the OECD/DAC Expert Group on Evaluation for commissioning the Study all positive Thus InterAction congratulated the Group for undertaking this comprehensive study It is a topic whose time has come The broad scope of the project makes it a contribution to further work in

improving evaluations in the development area However eight more critical comments were made about the Terms of Reference (TOR) and methods and approaches used

- The first was to argue that the Study would have been more valuable if it had not been required to focus so narrowly on evaluation studies, especially if it had included more work classified as 'research' if it had embraced longitudinal studies and made use of other sources of information on impact
- Secondly it was argued that the Study should have been widened to encompass the problems and weaknesses not merely of evaluation but of monitoring and planning In his presentation at the Bergen Conference Fritz Wils addressed this issue in some detail arguing not merely that it is **necessary** to locate evaluation within a Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation System (PMES) and that this wider frame of reference is critical but that one might need to think about soft pedalling' current emphases on evaluation and to focus far more attention on planning and monitoring This perspective was strongly endorsed by the NGO conference participants Likewise the French comments talk of the importance of utilising recurring evaluation methods to follow the progress of projects over time

- Thirdly it was suggested that more weight should have been given to methods and approaches and less on trying to record and isolate impact indeed it was argued that the Report s conclusions that it is difficult to make generalisations about impact reinforce this apparent imbalance Relatedly one of the NGO keynote speakers at the Bergen conference expressed concern with the current quest for impact On the one hand, our primary concern is not impact but to stay in business', on the other hand evaluation is expensive and one needs to do a cost-effectiveness assessment of the evaluation process – eventually a time will come when the resources spent on evaluation will negatively affect the quality of NGO development work Echoing some of the current thinking within USAID contained in the Report (see for instance page 74) it was asked whether NGOs are now expected to evaluate all their development interventions, for such a requirement was thought to be excessive It was also noted that the Report does not examine the training of evaluators, without which all the talk about improving the quality of evaluations is likely to come to nought

- The fourth criticism focused on the purported link between undertaking a synthesis study and making generalisations about the impact of NGO interventions and methods used More specifically it was argued that the Study fell into the same trap into which it accused the studies synthesised of falling the analysts seem to lack the kind of hard data to support their conclusions as to the studies (reviewed) yet they make assertions as readily as the evaluators they fault Likewise it was suggested that if as the Report suggests one needs to avoid talking or thinking in terms of NGOs as a whole then one needs to challenge the (linked) belief that is possible to obtain an overall NGO view of the content and recommendations of this Report

- A fifth criticism of the whole synthesis study was its failure to make clear the basis upon which impact was being judged More explicitly it was argued that one cannot discuss impact unless one has a benchmark against which to judge performance Thus the paucity of impact data may well conceal far better scope and depth of data than was available three four or five years ago Likewise it is not possible to come to judgement about impact unless one knows whether NGOs are achieving a better or worse impact than they did in previous time periods nor unless one knows the extent to which the NGOs record is different from official donors or other development actors

- A sixth point raised was that the Report failed to incorporate NGO advocacy lobbying and

development education activities in its synthesis of impact, though for some NGOs these are of overriding importance

- Seventhly the Australian submission criticised the Study s approach because of its weak analysis of the nature of the NGO donor relationship which often place severe limits on the manner in which NGOs are able to influence the development process

- Finally the Australian study argued that the Study should have undertaken an analysis of the NGOs efforts to fulfil evaluation in terms of both learning and accountability

Evaluations, impact and participation The linked issues of impact, evaluation methods and participation were the focus of much discussion in the different meetings and feedback received The Australian response argued that the Study placed insufficient emphasis on self evaluation and the value of project beneficiaries participating in regular data collection activities Fritz Wils contribution built on the Report s treatment by highlighting the (growing) influence on accountability upwards by donors which adds an additional layer of complexity to an already complex issue Some NGOs argued that there is often a problem with trying to measure impact especially when pressure is brought on NGOs to quantify effects in the social and political sphere While acknowledging that the issue is important Wils cautioned against using problems as a reason for doing nothing

> *I very much underwrite the Study s recommendations that serious work needs to be done in this connection But we should* ***not*** *surrender throw up our hands and argue as not a few NGOs are wont to do that especially qualitative changes at the macro level are beyond measurement I find this position a testimony of poverty in thinking and formulating relevant working hypotheses based on preliminary insight into the political economy and culture of a country*

The length of Report One set of comments focused on the length of the Report It was evident that hardly any of those participating in the meetings set up to discuss the findings and recommendations of the Report had had time to read the Report while some had skimmed through *The Main Report* none had had sufficient time to read through the country evidence contained in all the 13 appendix chapters This led some to argue that the Report was too long to read most NGO staff are simply to busy to read such long reports' In part to address this issue, the US contribution argued that *The Main Report* could be enriched by bringing in more specific and concrete examples of NGO practice especially those which illustrate innovative and participatory methods

It was at least partly because of this lack of familiarity with the Report and especially with the details of the country case studies, that some argued that the Report places too great an emphasis on donor commissioned studies and does not provide sufficient examples of NGOs own activities in using and experimenting with different methods of evaluation Another consequence is that the meetings which took place to discuss the Report were far broader than merely a discussion and assessment of what the Report stated most of these discussed the issues of NGO impact and evaluation methods in general , often making contributions which overlapped with the views contained within the Report even though, as discussed below, critical comments were also made (see §10 4)

The InterAction synthesis observed that *The Main Report* contained much repetitive material Among the specific issues mentioned was the length of the Executive Summary (ten pages) much of which consisted of material which are repeated several times in the body of the review It is partly because this view was shared more widely that it was agreed to shorten the Executive Summary in the final version of *The Main Report*

Time constraints There was some criticism of the short time period allowed for the Study though interestingly no criticism of the lack of involvement of NGOs in the synthesis process – an issue voiced in *The Main Report* (page 108)

10 3 General NGO comments on impact evaluation and methods

As noted above, in the majority of the meetings arranged to discuss the Report the vast majority of participants had not read the complete Report and were thus unfamiliar with much of its content and some of its recommendations As a result, a lot of time was spent in these meetings discussing issues which were addressed and discussed in the Report rather than providing critical comment on the Report In many respects this discussion was an important part of the overall process of reflection because it provided the opportunity for (largely) NGO personnel to focus upon and indicate the issues which they saw as important in the whole area under discussion The following points list very briefly some of the main issues which were raised in these discussions

- Some NGOs argued positively for using log frame approaches as they suggested this helped thinking through development processes with some rigour

- Though NGOs often contend that one important function of evaluations is to help the learning process rather than assess impact, some argued that it was necessary to ask and in some way try to assess the extent to which NGOs do in fact learn from evaluations

- Concern was expressed that, among other factors, too sharp a focus on impact and results might contribute to NGOs focusing too much on service delivery It was argued that this needed to be balanced by just as intense consideration of other issues areas and approaches Likewise the Australian response expressed concern that a focus on accountability to donors will inevitably lead to shift away from projects targeting poorer people toward less risky and fewer innovative projects It also stressed the need to look beyond the sustainability of projects and made a distinction between sustainability of projects and benefits for sustainable well being

- One group (in the UK meeting) examined the question 'what is impact' and highlighted the complexity of the issue Often it was argued it is necessary to assess the competence of NGOs as much as the impact of what they do, and the inter-relationship between the two

- Methods of evaluating need to focus as much on the verifiability of data as on the quantification of data It was argued that the view of the beneficiaries should never be viewed as an optional extra and that work should be encouraged which tries to identify performance indicators with local communities It was pointed out that there are important reasons for undertaking evaluations other than to find out more about impact – such as learning about new approaches Indeed there can be (political) circumstances when an NGO will not want to report on the impact its work is having, and should not be forced to do so

- Some NGOs argued that donors tend to overvalue the evaluations which they commission and tend to undervalue **all** other forms of assessing impact both NGO-initiated evaluations and linked research activities

- Concern was expressed at the sheer volume of data and information now being generated in what to many seems to have become an explosion of impact data It was argued that greater priority

should be given to assessing what these evaluations are teaching us before continuing to boost and give further encouragement to the process of commissioning more and more evaluations

- It was argued that evaluation issues should be of more concern to NGOs than to donors and thus that it is NGOs who should be discussing these issues more than donors

- It was acknowledged that NGOs need to focus more on base line studies However as these are usually very expensive to mount, there needs to be greater sharing across NGOs and with donors working in similar areas to pool data and information and thus to lower costs

- There needs to be greater recognition of the difficulty of undertaking substantive evaluations because of the difficulty of monitoring social change and trying to link cause and effect In spite of these problems NGOs and donors increasingly agree that evaluation of impact is necessary and there appears to be growing common ground between NGOs and donors on both the need for evaluation and the methods to use However it was argued that it is critically important not to lose sight of the difficulties involved in undertaking successful impact evaluations

- It was suggested that NGO skills might be used more often to help evaluate official aid projects

- The Australian response argued that the Study should have said more about partnership and the efforts made in capacity building

Finally, and to provide an important overarching conclusion to this discussion it is to be noted that one of the group discussions in Bergen pointedly failed to reach a consensus on most of the key issues being discussed – such as the links between planning, monitoring and evaluation the relative importance of external and self evaluation the question of who should evaluate and whether it is feasible in practice to hope to develop general guidelines The manifestation of these differences in viewpoint has wider applicability it cautions against reading too much into the content and views reported in this chapter It is important to note that because one person or a particular group of people or one Report puts forward a particular view or opinion this will not necessarily be received with unanimous support across all NGOs NGOs encompass an ever-wider variety of views experiences and modes on intervention and this needs to be acknowledged Consequently not everyone and not every NGO is likely to agree to all the points summarised in this chapter

10 4 Responses to the Study's conclusions and recommendations

A number of comments addressed specific conclusions and recommendations made in the Report This section summarises the comments made Overall there were no strong disagreements with any of the major recommendations made in the Report

The first cluster of comments made or views expressed supports and reinforces some of the Report s main conclusions and recommendations Thus

- There was unanimous agreement that no further general synthesis studies should be commissioned, at least in the short term – one suggestion was that there might be merit in considering undertaking such a study in a few years time in order to review progress made

- Fritz Wils argued that the Study s appeal to focus on issues beyond the project and the need to

focus clearly on what precisely is the role of NGOs in development especially vis a vis other actors – not least what they bring to service delivery – needs to be emphasised

- The Australian response supported the Study's recommendation that NGOs be encouraged to undertake evaluations as part of broader programme management systems

- The Report s view that if donors wish to focus more on trying to assess impact they need to widen the lens to try additionally to enhance methods and processes of planning and monitoring and undertaking base-line studies was strongly endorsed by many NGO contributions

- The Report s recommendation that efforts should be focused on ways of sharing information on evaluations on how to measure outcomes and especially of NGO best practice and innovatory approaches to evaluation were strongly endorsed, especially by staff members of NGOs

- The Report s suggestion that future work should focus on links between sustainability and poverty and cost effectiveness issues were endorsed, for instance in the UK meeting

- The Report s emphasis on distinguishing between smaller and larger NGOs was likewise, endorsed

- The Report s recommendation that more attention should be paid to sectoral and thematic issues was endorsed, for instance in the Swiss meeting and in the reactions from the French NGOs

- The Report s view that the evaluation scene is changing fast was endorsed at Bergen The question this raises is whether it is possible to capture statically such a changing and dynamic process

A number of additional recommendations were made often drawing attention to issues not addressed or highlighted in *The Main Report*

- Based on his analysis of the need to widen NGO impact work to planning and monitoring as well as evaluation work Fritz Wils recommended work which focused on answering the following questions why are NGOs so weak in the areas of appraisal and planning how can this performance including the formulation of specific objectives and indicators, be improved what are 'best practices' here both in the seemingly easier service-delivery programmes and the more complex socio-political interventions?

- Wils also argued for more work focused on NGO–donor links He suggested work which helped to clarify the different roles which NGOs and other development actors are expected to play and how they differ – unless donors are clear what they expect from NGOs the assessment of impact is likely to be and remain, rather abstract

- One suggestion (from the United States) was to focus more on what can be learnt from different types of evaluations directed at different stakeholders and what value each of these add In that context it was additionally suggested that there is a need to be clear on and isolate those conditions when evaluation will **not** be necessary

- Another suggestion (from the UK) was for NGOs (and perhaps other stakeholders) to make recommendations for the DAC Group what it was asked can NGOs expect from the DAC Group? In that general context, it was asked how donors were going to react to the criticism and

concerns some NGOs have about the (growing) concerns which donors have about impact

- NGO participants, for example those in the Swiss meeting recommended strongly that there needs to be a far more efficient system of information-sharing to learn about methods and best practices being used to evaluate NGO development projects In that context it was felt that the Study s recommendation on enhancing networks for information exchange needs to be strengthened

- It was recommended (in the Swiss consultation) that there should not be an automatic link between assessing impact and the volume of funding NGO development interventions

- It was suggested that a study should be conducted of the use made of evaluations and the extent to which recommendations made in NGO evaluations are carried out, and if not, why not Are some recommendations more difficult to accept or implement – which ones and why?

- It was proposed that encouragement should be given to undertaking more longitudinal studies of projects within particular countries (or sectors) and that there would be value in undertaking meta-evaluations which focus on evaluation experiences from the perspective of the local project community

- It was acknowledged that an important reason why some projects perform poorly is because they have not been appraised properly like official donors some NGOs are under pressure to spend money quickly It was suggested that more attention needs to be focused on the pressures which NGOs are increasingly under to start projects before they are ready to do so

10 5 Additional comments on the future developing NGO evaluation guidelines?

A number of fora where the study was discussed looked explicitly at the future, asking what next? now the Report has been published and initial discussion of its content and recommendations has begun One issue discussed (at Bergen) was whether there might now be merit in thinking about and focusing on ways of developing some general guidelines for NGO evaluations perhaps modelled on other (DAC/OECD or donor specific) guidelines Though there was insufficient time at Bergen to discuss this issue fully, it should be noted that in all six breakaway groups at the Bergen meeting there was quite strong support for such an initiative with some groups adding that it would be important to have NGO involvement in helping to develop such guidelines It was argued that there is a need to try to move towards at least acceptance of some minimum standards for evaluation though it was also recognised that this needs to address the problems of size – it is unlikely that the same (practical) guidelines could be drawn up for both smaller and larger NGOs Other more specific issues raised in the discussion of guidelines included the following

- There was some support for seeing if it were possible to develop and agree upon using particular clusters of indicators for particular groups of projects and programmes

- There was considerable interest in trying to expand knowledge on how to assess and evaluate longer term development interventions including especially interventions focusing on capacity building

- There was some (though not strong) support for further work to be done on cost effectiveness issues building on the work being done and cited in the Report (page 89 and ff), most of which is based on the view that orthodox cost benefit analysis is usually inappropriate (because too

narrow) for NGO development interventions

- It was suggested that it would be helpful to produce some initial (perhaps tentative) guidelines and then field test them before trying to apply them more widely Some NGO participants at the Bergen conference suggested that it would be important to build any future guidelines on experimentation with guidelines which is already going on such as in India with the German NGO, EZE

- It was also suggested that current DAC guidelines should be used as an important basis or source book' for developing NGO-specific guidelines

For their part the French organisations suggested some linkage between developing more precise tools for evaluating and working to create a more acceptable standard of evaluation building, perhaps on the work F3E has been doing in Latin America

Photo UNICEF/Jack Ling

ANNEX A

REFERENCES CITED

Note The works listed here refer to those quoted or referred to in the text of *The Main Report* The longer list of studies and other references used in the overall synthesis study, including the country and donor case studies, are all to be found in *Appendix 14 Bibliography and References*

A The Donor Studies

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ANNEX B

NGO Evaluation Synthesis Study

GENERAL BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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CONTENTS

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

This Appendix is divided into a number of sub sections Firstly references are grouped together by main country or donor focused principally on the data gathered for the different case studies undertaken for the synthesis study though separate headings have also been given for Australia Denmark Sweden Switzerland and New Zealand because of the number of distinct texts obtained for this study All other texts are brought together under Other References

Reports sent to the authors marked confidential have not been included in this bibliography to avoid requests for reports from the public being refused

Though many references are cited in this Appendix the authors wish to stress that this listing constitutes a very incomplete list of all relevant literature

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