

„Impact Assessment at Project Level – a Participatory Multi-Perspective Approach“

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Introduction

With the declaration of the “Millennium Development Goals” (MDG) results-based management in development cooperation substantially gained significance and priority. Every donor organisation is called to point out plausibly their contribution to the development efforts of their partner countries.

Results-based management in development cooperation is discussed and put in practice in manifold contexts. That includes the entire project cycle and all levels of intervention from individual projects to higher strategic levels in the region and partner countries. From the first steps of the project cycle by the incorporation of intended target impacts in strategic planning and the operational planning of projects and programmes up to the monitoring of impacts and in the end the impact assessment, all phases of project management are concerned: This article deals with impact assessment as one of the fields of results-based management. Even when the focus is being narrowed on impact assessment still there are many approaches and methods with diverse features, strengths and weaknesses.

The Centre for Advanced Training in Rural Development (SLE) at the Agricultural and Horticultural Faculty of the Humboldt University in Berlin is supported by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Senate of Berlin.

For 43 years the faculty has been offering a one-year post-graduate course and annually trains up to 20 graduates from various subject areas as specialists in international cooperation. During the course of the year, methods used in planning, team work, team management and organisational development are taught. In addition, thematic focus is placed on the fight against HIV/AIDS and civil conflict prevention. As “learning by doing” is a fundamental principle of SLE, projects in developing countries form the core of the course. Under the leadership of experienced consultants, groups of 4-5 participants from different subject areas implement the findings of studies or workshops as commissioned by national and international organisations. In 2005, four groups realised consultancy projects on behalf of DED, CGIAR, GTZ and FAO in Niger, Cambodia, Peru and Guatemala. During 2006 projects will be implemented in Ghana, Mozambique, Nicaragua and Georgia, on behalf of German Agro Action, GTZ and KfW. Additional information and summaries can be found on the homepage of SLE: www.berlinerseminar.de

Being convinced that approaches and methods need to be selected and adopted according to the specific situation, this article describes an approach to impact assessment by illustrating its overall framework, the conditions under which it has been designed, as well as the procedure and steps of the derived methodology. The overall objective of the study conducted in July to October 2005 was to incorporate results-based management in running projects of the German Development Service (DED) and its partner organisations.

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Framework of the approach

This approach for an impact assessment was tested and adopted in five weeks of field work together with the DED and six of its partner organisations in Guatemala.

As a general condition for the six projects there has not been any baseline study nor formulated impact indicators. A first step to incorporate result-based management in a running project was therefore to assess the impacts already achieved. As in many projects the available resources of time, money and staff for an impact assessment are scarce. Therefore the simple handling of the approach is an important aspect for its applicability and usefulness.

The impacts on project level were in the focus of the developed approach. Thereby different areas of impacts in the project context are being considered:

It is a particular characteristic of DED that it does not implement its development projects with its own staff; instead, DED experts work as advisors in local partner organisations:

The activities of the DED-advisor do stimulate changes in the partner organisation (immediate target group of DED advisory project) and the partner organisation again initiates changes at their target group level (indirect target group of DED project).

The existence of intermediaries may further enhance the complexity of the impact relations.

As it has been considered far too complex to account for the impacts of a single person or small team (advisor and his/her direct colleagues) on the indirect target group, the approach examines the two “impact areas” A and B independently.

That means, the “attribution gap” between the impact within the partner organisation and the impact of the organisation’s activities in the (indirect) target group is not being “closed” by the approach – after all, it seems not to be reasonable to express the impact of a single person within an organisation on the organisation’s target group.

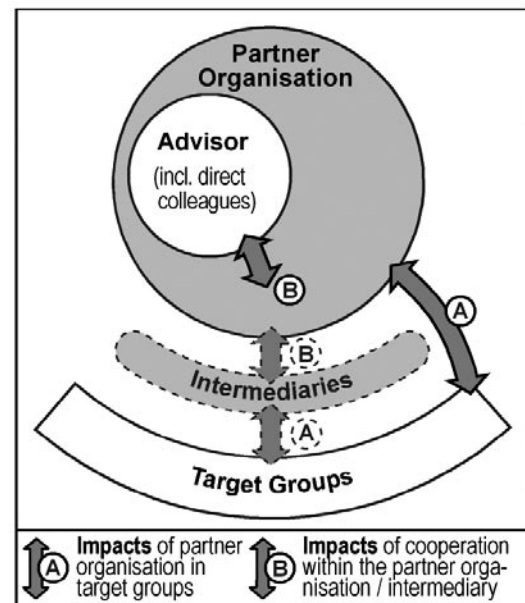


Figure 1

Features and procedure of the approach

The most outstanding features of the approach are:

- Triangulating the perspectives of different actors: statements on change – and thus perceived impact – are drawn from the subjective evaluations of the project participants concerned (DED-expert and staff members of the partner organisation, target groups, and possible intermediaries). This also incorporates aspects of self-evaluation.
- The balance between information retrieval and learning process: impact assessment generates a knowledge base on results hitherto achieved. Through the reflection of different perspectives it also gives space for internal learning processes.
- The procedure and the instruments applied are as far as possible standardised to allow for a simple, cost- and time-saving use.
- The simple methods used in the participative workshops and interviews allow the application by the project staff and to save resources.
- The extent and depth of the assessment are determined in the initial phase, according to the need: this flexible approach allows for consideration of very different and even very complex project contexts. Further steps of analysis permit more in-depth reflection of key project elements.

Procedure at a glance

The procedure is broken down into four stages, as shown in Figure 2.

- I. In the initial preparation meeting the extent and further steps are being agreed on by relevant stakeholders and the overall impact assessment is being planned.
- II. In phase II an impact analysis is carried out in the form of several workshops or interviews with the relevant groups participating in the project (advisor, partner organisation staff, target groups, and intermediaries if required).
- III. In a next step (synthesis workshop) the different perspectives on the project's/co-operation impacts are to be merged and jointly discussed by representatives of all involved stakeholders.
- IV. Key findings can be used for reviewing project steering. If necessary follow up measures can be formulated, e.g. the organisation's monitoring system can be modified to incorporate impact indicators

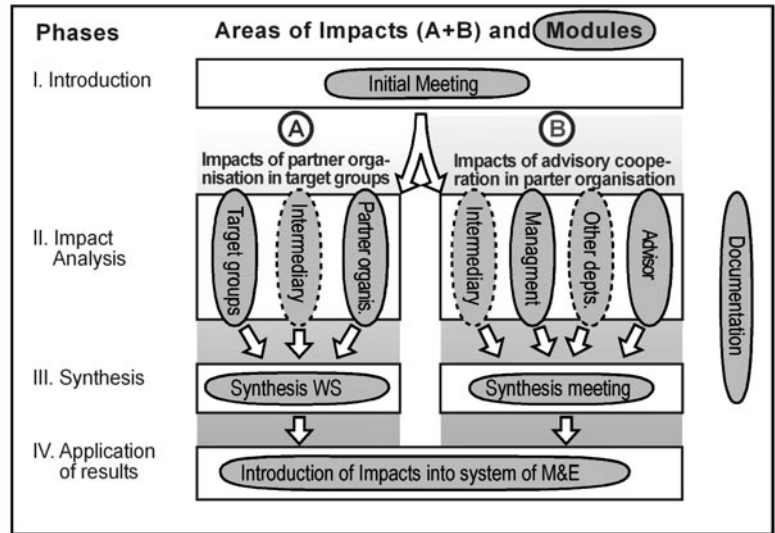


Figure 2

A) Impacts of the organisation's activities on the target group

The assessment of impacts at indirect target group level is basically done by means of an open mapping and some key questions covering different "dimensions" of possible impacts, namely the cross-cutting themes of the organisation. In a subsequent step the named impacts / changes can be further qualified.

| Area of change | First step: "in the last X years, have there been changes in the organisation?" | | |
|---|---|-----|---|
| | Yes | No | Comment |
| Communication and internal cooperation (transparency of information, regular meetings, ...) | X | | since 2004 we have regular information meetings with all team members |
| ... | ... | ... | ... |

B) Impacts of the advisor on partner organisation

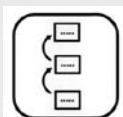
The impacts of the advisor in the partner organisation are recorded in a much more standardised way. In most cases the advice given is related to the structures and procedures of the partner organisation, therefore changes in 10 typical organisational features (i.e. planning and monitoring of activities, decision making and communication, financing, etc.) are being asked for.

| Second step: "who has initiated these changes, and how has this been done?" | |
|---|--|
| Who? | How? |
| DED-Advisor | she proposed the meetings and did the facilitation during first year |
| ... | ... |

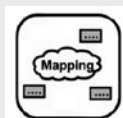
Example: workshop with partner organisation

The arrangement and the steps of the workshop differ to a little extent only, particularly regarding the degree of abstraction and deepening of content.

Methodological steps of the workshop:

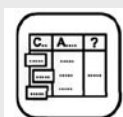


1. Introduction of the workshop's objectives and methodology to the participants



2. Introduction of the topic "impact" through presentation or participatory elaboration of an example of an impact chain.

3. Mapping of impacts of the partner organisation as perceived by their members



4. Broaden the perspective of impacts: query for impacts in the DED's cross-cutting themes (poverty reduction, gender, ecological sustainability, conflict sensitivity, intercultural aspects, participation) as well as for unintended positive and negative impacts.

5. Deepen the understanding of selected impacts: discussion of their degree of achievement, their intensity, signs of proof/evidence (used instead of "indicators"), potentials for enhancement/mitigation

6. Conclusion of the workshop: summary of the results and information on next steps/follow-up

Nature of results obtained: facts and figures versus activities and practice

As stated before, the results obtained with the approach are twofold:

- facts denoting changes and impacts as perceived by the project's stake holders
- a learning process in which the stake holders enter into a structured dialogue.

A) "facts and figures"

The facts gathered through the process are based on a subjective perception, but triangulated with at least one other perspective. In most cases the results are of a highly qualitative nature, rarely figures are obtained.

The most important features of the results are:

- they do represent knowledge (and not data), which is understandable by the respective group (advisor, partner organisation, target group);

- it is difficult to compare and to aggregate the results obtained in different contexts (at least not without substantial interpretational effort and knowledge of the respective situations)
- the results are not exactly repeatable. They should be used with care when making statements about achieved impact to outside actors (e.g. donors).

B) "activities and practice"

Especially in the synthesis workshop the stakeholders enter into a structured dialogue about shared and differing objectives, activities and achieved impacts as well as their specific or common ways of planning and project realisation. Because the procedure of the workshops is transparent and results are easily understood by all stakeholders, the approach allows for a strong emphasis on the learning process.

The experience made in Guatemala indicates that even in projects where communication between stakeholders is perceived to be satisfactory, a structured sharing of the various perceptions on impacts can reveal a significant need of discussion or repositioning.

Resources needed

The time required for a minimum number of workshops (a preparatory meeting, a one-day workshop with advisor and the partner organisation, two to three half-day workshops with members of the target group, a half-day synthesis workshop), their preparation and documentation is approximately 6 - 10 days, depending on the intensity / scope of the analysis and the experience of the facilitator.

The facilitator of the workshops should be experienced in facilitation techniques and know how to synthesise and summarise the contents of each workshop. Good knowledge in local language/communication and culture turned out to be essential.

The necessary financial resources are comparably few – covering transport, workshop material and refreshments. However, if no one in the project context has sufficient facilitation experience, the involvement of external facilitation is recommended, especially if there is potential for conflict between stake holders. This, then raises expenses substantially.

A vital prerequisite for successful application of the approach is the openness of all stake holders to accept and discuss the perspectives on the impacts of their activities.

Specific strengths and limitations of the approach

With the approach, valuable knowledge about impacts can be drawn from rapidly obtainable and simple trend statements.

The participatory design allows for a common reflection and discussion on desired and achieved impacts, including not intended and negative impacts.

The information obtained can be used for project steering (are we still within our “target corridor”), as well as for the organisation’s or project’s strategic planning (are we doing the right things?).

In addition to that it serves for a sensitisation of stakeholders for result oriented management / impacts and directs the attention towards project objectives beyond the mere activity/output level.

Limitations

The most important limitation of the approach derives from the nature of obtained information on change and impact: it does not provide baseline-like data, because the focus is change and not a given state.

It requires a great effort to compare or aggregate the information (i.e. comparison or aggregation of various impact assessments of different project sites on district or regional level).

The approach is not suitable for a rapid and continuous monitoring of impacts, due to the substantial effort required.

The attribution gap between the activity of the advisor and the changes on target group level is not being “closed”. It might be done with a certain level of plausibility only.

Conclusion

The described approach can be used especially in projects with emphasis on capacity building or advisory services for organisations or institutions. It has been tested and it showed good results in small - up to middle sized organisations (8 to 70 people) in a Latin American context. The impacts of an organisation on its target group can be analysed quite well in contexts, where the organisation (or intermediary) works directly with the target group in opposition to more policy/advocacy oriented organisations.

If desired, the combination of modules also permits to examine the two areas (impact of partner organisation on target groups; impact of advisor on partner organisation) separately.

The triangulation brings together the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders, all of them experts in their respective context, and gives space for reflection especially on unplanned and on negative impacts, which do normally receive few attention.

Compared to other approaches the most outstanding features are its simplicity, especially regarding the comprehensibility of results generated, as well as its emphasis on learning processes.

Thus it can assist in improving both efficiency and effectiveness as well as strategic orientation of development processes.