

Book Review

EVALUATING DEVELOPMENT AID: ISSUES, PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

B. E. CRACKNELL (Sage Publications, New Delhi - 2000)

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The evaluation of development aid is increasingly recognized as an important tool not only to improve the quality of aid intervention but also to increase the legitimacy of various strategies adopted. In this sense Basil Edward Cracknell's book provides an excellent opportunity to gain a comprehensive overview of the discussions held over the last four decades and some of the important methodologies adopted. The book represents not only an ideal handbook for practitioners, but also serves as a textbook for applied courses in the development field. Introducing evaluation concepts and techniques more systematically as an educational component, especially at the University level, could go a long way to institutionalise a process among various (national, regional as well as local) organisations in Sri Lanka to improve quality and sustainability of development aid in the country.

After a short overview of aid evaluation, from the late 1960s to the present, the book begins with some basic issues in relation to evaluation such as reasons for evaluation (accountability objectives versus lessons-learning approaches), effects of evaluation on different stakeholders, focus (projects versus programmes) types of evaluation, and organization of evaluation activity. A whole section then emphasizes the importance of setting up a comprehensive planning matrix of development interventions as a prerequisite for successful evaluation. This also has to include indicators to measure progress towards the achievement of identified objectives and to avoid confusion between outputs and objectives of a project. There is also a need to raise awareness on underlying assumptions that have been made during the planning of a project and the risks involved in its implementation. To assess the

sustainability of a project, it is also crucial to look into the perceptions of the project by different stakeholders and their views regarding the appropriateness of the development activities adopted.

The book then introduces techniques and methods of aid evaluation, such as, interviews with key personnel, measuring change over time, effectiveness and efficiency of projects, significance of development interventions, cost-benefit analyses, identification of unintended effects, and rating/ scoring systems. It provides a very useful overview of the common methods being used by evaluators, although the focus of such evaluation is generally less on the social objectives that are more difficult to quantify. However, given the significance of social sector projects nowadays it would be important to incorporate more qualitative methods for the measurement of such social objectives into the "tool box" of aid evaluators.

The next section shifts the attention to the crucial link between constant project monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring must be seen as the key source of data for evaluation, but also as an important tool to permanently check whether a project is on its way to achieving its objectives or whether modifications from the original planning matrix have to be made. In this sense, monitoring would serve the immediate needs of the project management, whereas evaluation is more often a tool for the donor agencies to check on the final project outcome. In this sense, Cracknell correctly requests a stronger conceptual and methodological separation of the two instruments that are often put together in one Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) unit.

A substantial part of the book is then devoted to the question of whether monitoring and evaluation during the course of a project can be conducted in a participatory manner, to get the local stakeholder more involved in the process. In this regard, the book also cites some examples, one of which could also be of significant relevance to the Sri Lankan context, which is a stronger involvement of local government authorities in the M&E process. For developing countries with democratic structures, it would be worthwhile to elaborate more on these approaches. Getting local governments involved in the planning and

evaluation of development activities could not only increase the legitimacy of such interventions, but could also contribute towards a more democratic form of legitimising the donor and NGO activities by people at the receiving end. So far questions of checks and balances are only directed towards the local level, but not the other way around.

Another important aspect the book highlights is the role of organizational dynamics which need to be taken more into account when it comes to evaluation. These dynamics matter because organizational objectives (as well as conflicting interests within organizations) are often the main factor behind the reasons in assessing whether project objectives can be achieved or not. Important dimensions in this regard are also the political goals of different organizations, an area that is still largely undiscovered with regard to the question of how to address such issues through evaluation techniques. Cracknell's book doesn't go into detail here, rather leaving it with the general request to improve communication within organizations on evaluation results so as to ensure that acquired knowledge through evaluation leads to an improvement of aid performance.

This request leads to the following sections of the book calling for an improvement of various feedback systems within organizations and projects to increase the possibilities for organizations to learn more systematically from their own experiences. These improvements focus (among others) on the importance of user-friendly and well-structured evaluation reports, clearer recommendations, transparency, institutional mechanisms of feedback at the programme/project as well as the policy/strategy level, better follow-up strategies, and the importance of setting up proper management information systems.

Finally the author places emphasis again on the crucial issue of sustainability with regard to the question of whether development activities will last longer than the time period during which outside support is provided. One important aspect of evaluation is to take a clear look at the impact of certain projects on people and their environment rather than focus only on the immediate achievements of certain spelled-out project goals.

A very important aspect in this regard that could have been highlighted even more is the investigation of the unintended as well as the negative impacts of a project. Here the book is missing a link to the more recent discussion on "Do-No-Harm" - awareness of aid implementers that has arisen out of a growing recognition that development interventions often lead to an increase in existing social conflicts or sometimes even to the creation of new conflicts in the surrounding projects (e.g. due to injustice distribution effects, favouritism of certain ethnic communities, gender discrimination, introduction of unsuitable technologies, causation of environmental problems etc.). Project intervention will never be socially neutral in nature and it is very important for planners and practitioners to become more sensitive to these issues. This opens another important field for evaluators to investigate the wider impact of projects in terms of their potential to increase or decrease conflicts in society.

Cracknell also addresses some important problems in evaluation, such as evaluating good governance (which is increasingly seen as a crucial factor for the provision of a suitable framework for successful development interventions), problems in evaluating poverty alleviation (in terms of difficulties to define poverty appropriately, to find suitable poverty indicators, or to identify techniques to measure changes over time etc.) and problems in evaluating NGOs (whose budget is often too small and work too voluntary in nature for applying more systematically, other forms of evaluation than self-evaluation).

To further improve evaluation, Cracknell finally emphasizes the importance of incorporating the beneficiary stakeholders more strongly in the process of planning and evaluating projects. This raises various questions about different viewpoints between donor and recipient, resulting in different criteria and emphases when it comes to evaluation. Such an attempt would on the one hand require an empowerment of the beneficiaries in terms of their decision-making power and active participation when it comes to monitoring and evaluation. On the other hand, it would also require a more independent approach towards evaluation by the developing countries, including the strengthening of local capacities for evaluation.

More participatory evaluation approaches also offer new opportunities to develop better indicators for assessing social development aid projects and impact on their beneficiaries. This could also include the development of more qualitative indicators to measure not only basic needs achievements, but aspects of human dignity in a wider sense as well. However, Cracknell correctly concludes the book with the recognition that although "empowerment of the lowers" is an important aspect in the overall improvement of the evaluation process, there are also a number of problems to be seen in regard to the participatory approach. This includes the inexperience of actors, lack of commitment on behalf of the partner organizations, pressure through outside expectations, limited participation of women, difficulties in evaluation of larger structures and stakeholders at national and international levels. Therefore the way ahead in evaluation should be to adopt a mixture of both conventional and participatory approaches. In addition, communication between organizations and evaluators should be strengthened to improve learning from each other's experiences.

Now Sri Lanka has its own evaluation society that was established just last year (the Sri Lankan Evaluation Association - SLEvA). If the ideas and concepts provided by Cracknell could be utilized, another layer of actors could be established between the people at the local level and the Donor/ NGO level that can increase the possibilities for Sri Lankan professionals to investigate the impact of development interventions. Evaluation could be an important tool to assess the performance of international and national level organizations in Sri Lanka and increase the quality and legitimacy of development aid in Sri Lanka at the same time.