

Impact evaluation: discussing methods and techniques

Round table // Social and solidarity economy and Social entrepreneurship

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Executive summary

Impact assessment has become increasingly important in every area of humanitarian intervention and development aid. The traditional large-sample statistical survey is still a reference. On the upside, it is popular and produces quantitative data on large samples, yet it remains a long process and focuses on the results more than the organization of the project and its efficiency.

New methods (reasoned sample surveys, peer review, observatories and SROI) are seeking to implement an actionable feedback to instill quality and constant progress, and to shorten the lag in the return of information. They also provide a timeframe for evaluation, allowing the evolution of positive and negative impacts on the behaviors and in particular the situations of targeted populations to be integrated. They stress the importance of ex ante social science-based analysis to understand the situation of the populations, the specific sociological context (political, anthropological and social),

and the adequacy of the means and the structures that have been chosen to reach the objectives of the project's mission. While these developments enrich the analysis, they are also contributing to provide an assessment on a relative basis; i.e. they are intimately linked to the context and the objectives of the project. Even their terminology reflects in some way the project they are assessing.

The fact remains that the greatest developments are still to come in the upstream analysis of objectives, in the expected impact of the projects, and in the provision of resources to train and employ a sufficient staff with the right tools and assessment practices. In terms of methodology, allocation and cost of opportunity analyses remain in the field of research. The unification of methodologies could increase the assessors' productivity through accumulation and capitalization.

Synthesis

Impact evaluation has evolved historically along with its methods and objects, and this is linked to the evolution of people's interest in the field. This evolution gradually brings together three types of applicants: donors, stakeholders, and beneficiaries, drawing inspiration from both the academic and the business world. The evolution observed is similar for humanitarian actors, those in development and those further upstream, in philanthropy.

The first phase, whereupon the resources invested in the evaluation grew fivefold, answered a donor query on the impact of the funds available for the projects. The method used for this type of evaluation is a randomized study. This method aims to measure improvements for targeted populations using a statistically significant sample of the population to identify which progress has been made. To ensure thorough results, these studies follow strict protocols, particularly in the selection of samples, which depend on cumbersome methods of collection of information which can take a lot of time before the results are made available. In the case of microfinance, these protocols also triggered heated debates over their reliability. In theory, they involve the use of a blank sample (which does not benefit from the project nor from the program), something which is unacceptable in the analysis of humanitarian operations and often inapplicable in development because of the variety of the situations.

There are nevertheless three significant advantages to these studies:

- They allow for a credible quantification of the impact.
- They can accumulate a lot of information which allows to better understand the situation of targeted populations.
- They provide a solid picture of operations through a massive collection of data.

Though criticized for their simplistic aspect (standardization of measures, unaccountability for the negative impact, picture without any temporal perspective etc.), or challenged conceptually because they do not take into account the diversity of the first stages of a project which are necessarily segmented, these studies stand as a reference when it comes to the effects of interventions (such as the recent example offered by microfinance).

Upon the request of the main beneficiaries of these evaluations, i.e. the actors of the project, new methods have been developed. Traditional methods of assessment and support have integrated a dynamic dimension while continuing to answer essentially the donors' concerns.

In order to influence the structures and the processes of the projects, professional assessors, either **GRET** in the field of development, **CERISE** in the specific field of microfinance, or **URD Group** in humanitarian actions, have chosen to adhere to quality approaches: being good at doing good and proving it. That means integrating the impact (doing good), ensuring the quality of the approach, procedures, and activities (being good), and finally,

responsibility and accountability (proving it).

The SROI approach, designed consecutively by the philanthropic and academic fields, then professionals in the business sector, has identified similar tools and issues and is attempting to synthesize them in a pecuniary way. In both cases, with similar philosophies despite different methods, these new approaches stress the importance of upstream investment ahead of the project, the integration of the widest possible range of impacts and the relevance of mixing speed and thoroughness of analysis, even if statistical credibility is scathed.

What are these new approaches about? They aim to get closer to the operational reality of projects by taking into account:

- The initial configuration of the project: analyzing the mission and the chosen axes of impact (SROI), implementing ex ante analysis of the conditions through the establishment of observatories in risk areas (URD in Haiti, Afghanistan), developing ex ante anthropological (behavioral) or sociological studies (GRET), and formalizing upstream choices (all). Even a questionable choice, such as subsidized agricultural zones in Afghanistan, which follow a 'value for money' priority (therefore conforming to the emphasis given to rich agricultural zones more so than other more redistributable targets in poor pastoral areas), is better than an absence of choice. The more accurate the subject, the better the chances of success.
- The selection and the structuring of indicators: not only do they stem from the selected objective, but also from the form of the organization, the way the structures and the implementation of the project, the approach, and the project team achieve results. These outcomes can be significantly different from those of the donors. For example, in the case of the ongoing SROI study on the evaluation of rehabilitation programs, a different development perspective exists between the State, which measures the impact of the program social transfers, and the actors, who target the improvement of the quality of life of individuals in a difficult situation. By forcing the actors to assess their action quantitatively, everyone is given a perspective as to the origin of this value.
- The diversity of situations: reasoned sample based measurement and impact validation through comparative analysis.
- Extending the concept of impact: beyond project efficiency in a classical sense, the analysis focuses on the feelings of populations and negative impacts (for example anticipating how last minute seed importation will lead to the eradication of better suited local crop-growing products, and therefore to a sustainable decline in agricultural productivity).
- Information return time: selected indicators are rapidly collected to yield a measurement that is 80% correct.
- The appropriation of evaluation processes: new approaches build the measurement settings along with the project team, and the follow-up is

carried out with the help of an independent evaluator alongside the team in the field.

- Return forms and tools of analysis: beyond quantitative analysis, return forms allow a more concrete training and a finer understanding of areas for improvement such as audio or video recordings, images and structured interview summaries. Within the framework of the SROI approach, monetization led groups to use marketing analysis tools to analyze perceived value (e.g., how much is passing the driving license worth in relation to buying a new TV?).

These methods provide dynamic and useful answers to the questions of the teams to make the interpretation of the changes in the beneficiaries' behavior progress. They have answered numerous questions from the teams of the projects and a base of robust tools is in the process of being built. Two issues remain to be addressed:

- the allocation, i.e. the share of impact that can actually be attributed to the project compared to other initiatives and developments underway,
- the opportunity cost, i.e. the value of the program compared to other actions or compared to no action at all.

Various obstacles remain, notably from the systematic use of new tools of evaluation. The first obstacle is that these new tools do not ensure the compatibility among projects; even the SROI method, which reflects the impact of monetary value, shows the variability of the results depending on the value of impact settings and the selected hypotheses of attribution. Impact is a relative notion that stems beyond intentional efforts from the intention of the actors and the perspective of the project beneficiary. The SROI method shows that its main use is in the structuring and dynamic assessment of the project, not primarily in the demonstration of the actions' "profitability".

The second obstacle is more culture-oriented. Donors in particular have a very quantitative perspective of impact measurement. Even if numerous

actors are open to the introduction of more refined methods for analyzing the progress of the project, they reckon almost unanimously that only encrypted data collected from a very large number of samples have evidential value. The ex ante evaluation of the allocation of funds by the donors remains a more delicate subject than the evaluation of chosen programs.

Moreover, preliminary studies are often minimized or completely eluded to the benefit of the application of standardized methods of intervention, particularly in the area of humanitarian intervention, which claims to be part of emergency operations. The absence of quantitative "baselines" is made more serious by the lack of communication with local actors and communities. This is what happened in Léogâne, where teams who did not take advisory from the mayor, who also happened to be a sorcery guru, could not explain the reluctance of the population towards outsiders and their contempt for foreign religious institutions. The frequent justification used to explain the analytical flaws is the lack of time; however, when 72 hours have passed in the field of humanitarian aid, one can no longer claim to be operating under an emergency situation.

Finally, learning best practices for the preparation of intervention and evaluation remains the weakest aspect of development and humanitarian action. In spite of some progress, the same mistakes are repeated generation after generation. One of the areas to be developed is that of funding and training, now that a consensus on good practices has been found.

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