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Impact assessment and advocacy¹

This chapter looks at the particular challenge of assessing the impact of advocacy initiatives, in terms of both designing an assessment and selecting tools and methods for it. The material presented uses three main ways to examine the impact of advocacy and policy work. The first analyses activities designed to change policies and through reasoned argument seeks to predict or explain their general impacts. The second assesses to what extent various groups' abilities have been enhanced, and what they can now achieve. The third approach is to examine how policies are implemented in practice and what the actual, specific impact on people's lives is. The chapter concludes that a major challenge is to bring these different approaches together in order to make an overall assessment of impact. In addition it is suggested that the findings from impact assessment processes can themselves be used as important evidence for advocacy work in the future.

Non-government organisations have in recent years put a growing proportion of their time and resources into 'advocacy' work. Advocacy is sometimes defined simply as the pursuit of change in policy or practice for the benefit of specific individuals or groups of people. However, some would argue that NGO advocacy should be defined more specifically as 'the strategic use of information to democratise unequal power relations and to improve the condition of those living in poverty or who are otherwise discriminated against'². This is because NGOs seek to improve the situation for a particular constituency, and because they should seek to do so in a way that strengthens that constituency's power to influence others on their own terms.

Advocacy may therefore involve direct lobbying, public campaigning, public education, as well as capacity-building and creating alliances in order to achieve desired changes in people's lives. Many large agencies now have dedicated policy departments which carry out research and lobbying on specific issues, and the NGO presence at major international events — such as the Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, the Copenhagen Social Summit in 1995, and the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 — has increased dramatically. Both Northern and Southern NGOs have invested time and money in trying to influence the outcome of

these events. However, like any other aspect of their work, NGOs need to be able to justify this investment to themselves and to other stakeholders and to improve their ability to achieve an impact in this way.

Yet many, within and outside the NGO sector, still have doubts about advocacy work. Are NGOs drifting away from what they are supposed to be good at — running field projects or ‘grassroots’ work — into areas where they have limited competence and even less leverage? Or is it high time that they tried to attack the root causes of poverty? Who determines the policy agenda, and who assesses the impact of policy change? Does the increasing level of subcontracting threaten NGOs’ ability to promote change in the policy arena? Is there a trade-off between undertaking advocacy oneself and building the capacity of others to undertake their own advocacy? What proportion of resources might most effectively be allocated to advocacy compared with other work? Does advocacy ultimately make a difference to the lives of people living in poverty — or does it result, at best, in changed rhetoric and empty promises, and at worst in the development of policies and practices which actually leave marginalised groups worse off? These are the kinds of questions that are currently being debated within and between NGOs and that any impact assessment exercise must bear in mind.

Particular problems with assessing the impact of advocacy work

NGOs need to demonstrate that their advocacy work is not only effective but also cost-effective and has impact in the sense of making a positive difference to people’s lives. They must show that lasting change in policy and practice actually results in improving the lives of men and women living in poverty and that this achievement is due, at least in part, to their research, capacity-building, and lobbying efforts. NGOs also need to know under what conditions they should advocate on behalf of others and when they should be strengthening others to speak for themselves. They have to demonstrate that they are going about this work in a professional and competent manner, and use the monitoring of this work to learn and to improve future performance. These are not new issues: the same criteria should be applied to grassroots projects. However, advocacy work presents some particular challenges.

A large proportion of advocacy work is long-term; it may lack dramatic moments when it is possible to say that a significant change has occurred. Policy change is often incremental and slow, and implementation lags significantly behind legislative change. Although there may be exceptions to this, particularly in single-issue campaigns, the relationship between these ‘victories’ and long-term policy change is complex and difficult to untangle. In

addition, policy- and decision-making processes are subject to a large number of influences. The necessary change in policy or practice may happen in a place far removed from where impact is sought; policy and practice changes may need to occur at the local, national, and international level. Combining and cross-checking assessments from multiple levels can be 'like trying to force pieces from different puzzles into one frame' (Oxfam GB 1998). This complexity becomes even greater in trying to demonstrate that advocacy has prevented something from happening. For example, how can one prove that violent conflict would have occurred if not for an NGO's influencing work to persuade opposing parties to resolve their conflict by non-violent means?

A great deal of advocacy work takes place through networks and coalitions. Positive results are often achieved through a rich mix of strategies, with some agencies taking a confrontational line and others conducting an 'insider' debate; indeed, sometimes individual agencies may adopt both approaches at once. This combination may be effective, with the public campaigners forcing open doors for others, but it can make attribution and impact assessment very difficult. It may be counterproductive for a particular agency to say exactly how its own efforts contributed to the final outcome, either because this will be seen to undervalue the contributions of others, or because disclosure may compromise future initiatives.

Even when the objectives of a piece of advocacy work are clear, the means by which they are achieved are often less certain and usually have to be adapted over time, making it difficult to draw up predetermined plans and select progress indicators. In advocacy work, it is necessary to invest in a variety of activities and cultivate a large number of contacts in order to cover a range of potential opportunities for influencing. Many of these may not bear fruit in the short term, or even at all, but it is often not possible to determine this beforehand and some 'failures' or 'lost causes' may eventually lead to changing future policy and practice in a positive way.

Much advocacy work is unique. Seizing opportunities and innovation are often critical components of successful advocacy; there is relatively little repetition, which prevents the gradual accumulation of knowledge across a series of 'projects'. Lessons are more likely to be about the relative merits of various strategies in addressing specific audiences, as well as different sequences and combinations of tools and methods, than about developing a single model of change or assessment.

As Rick Davies has noted, if one adopts the dictionary definition of advocacy as 'verbal support or argument for a cause' then an advocate is often a broker or mediator between two parties: the 'client' and the 'audience'. Impact assessment therefore needs to look at the advocate's relationship with both parties. Davies recognises that there are particular problems with relating to 'clients'. In some

cases the 'intended beneficiaries' may not know that they are the 'intended beneficiaries'; in many cases they do not have a choice about who will undertake the advocacy role and lack influence over their advocate. The balance of power in the relationship between audience, advocate, and client is not in favour of people living in poverty; and it may be more seductively attractive for the advocate to talk to powerful people than to the poor (Davies 1997). Moreover, if an agency is seeking to change policies which may have an impact on many thousands or even millions of people (such as debt relief) then the logistical and practical difficulties of consulting with them become enormous. In this type of advocacy work, talking to the ultimate beneficiaries and understanding their perception of impact becomes even more difficult than in grassroots projects.

Some of the above issues, as discussed in earlier chapters, also apply to long-term development work: it does not produce dramatic breakthroughs, attribution is difficult, it requires an appropriate mix of approaches, and the work is often unique. This is particularly the case as one moves away from narrow project-based assessments and towards the examination of long-term programmes and relationships with other actors.

Designing an impact assessment process for advocacy work

Defining the purpose and the types of impact to be assessed

Returning to the arguments in Chapter 3, impact assessments of advocacy work need to be clear about what the purpose of the assessment is, and who it is for. Similarly, as outlined in earlier chapters, certain assumptions about how policy change happens and what types of impact are to be examined must also be made explicit. I am using some examples from the case studies, but as few of them looked at advocacy in depth, I am also drawing on material from other sources.

The NK and GSS case study from Bangladesh sets out a clear model of change which is mainly based on the development of group cohesion and the groups' subsequent ability to advocate and push for change in policies and practice at a level beyond that of the village. The following stages in group cohesion are identified and then tracked over time.

- 1 Group formation
- 2 Group carries out activities
- 3 Group sets up or joins a federation beyond the village level
- 4 Movement is launched which takes on groups with vested interests
- 5 Groups of poor are involved in framing legislation and have control over resources

This approach focuses mainly on assessing the capacity of groups of people living in poverty to have a growing say in their lives and to influence the agenda of the more powerful. At the same time the study explores the necessary levels of support that are required from intermediary organisations at each level of group cohesion. This relationship is explored in more depth in Chapter 7.

The CYSD study in Orissa, India, analysed their programme in terms of first-order change (outputs), second-order change (effects), and third-order change (impact). First-order change was measured in terms of the numbers and types of groups that were formed as a result of the project, such as village development committees, self-help groups, forest protection committees, farmers clubs, and *mabila samiti* (federation of women's self-help groups). Second-order change was assessed in terms of the evolution of these groups through membership drives, formal registration, creating a community infrastructure, and in terms of changes in the growth of community activities, the roles and regularity of meetings, and the use of community centres. In assessing the impact at community level (third-order change), it was examined if and how groups shared approaches and techniques or used them more widely; how many and what kind of proposals and demands the community made; what changes occurred in community norms and behaviour (for example, in terms of gender or dependence/ self-reliance); and what degree and range of activities the groups believed they could accomplish.

The CYSD study was particularly interested in the links between the three levels of change. All results from the three villages where the detailed study was undertaken were compared with a control village. Looking at impact in this way (for example, comparing those villages which had a community centre provided by the project with the control village which did not have a centre) also allowed a comparison between the abilities of the communities to influence others. One of the ways this was done was to list the proposals and demands made by each of the communities and their effects (see Table 6.1). The control village — although it has generally made fewer proposals and demands — like two of the other villages has submitted a proposal for legal rights to encroached land. This suggests either that the project's influence has spread beyond the initial villages, or that the ability to submit proposals is not attributable to the project. The fact that its proposal has not had a result yet, whereas those from the other villages have, may or may not point to differences in an ability to not only submit proposals but to have them acted upon. Using a control group allows these kinds of questions to be asked, even if further investigation will be required if they are to be answered.

Table 6.1: Assessing community proposals and demands, CYSD, Orissa

Village	Proposals and demands	Effect and level of the action
I	Submitted proposal for forest protection rights	Forest protection right over 30 acres granted by Forest Department of the Government of Orissa
	Submitted proposal for transferring legal right to their encroached land	Eight households received legal right to encroached land
	Submitted proposal to the displacement officer for rehabilitation compensation on their displacement	All villagers received reasonable compensation
II	Submitted proposal for a water harvesting scheme	Accepted by block office, now in progress
	Submitted proposal for care feed system	Villagers are getting food items from block office
	Submitted proposal for transferring legal right to their encroached land	Eight households received legal right to encroached land
	Submitted proposal for loan for starting poultry farm	Bank has assured loan
	Proposal for protection rights over 320 acres of forest	No result as yet
III	Submitted proposal for forest protection rights	Forest protection right over 75 acres granted by Forest Department of the Government of Orissa
	Submitted request for more canal water to be released to the village	More water now allotted to the village
	Submitted proposal for road-construction scheme	Accepted by block office; road has been constructed
Control	Submitted proposal for transferring legal right to their encroached land	No result as yet

This example demonstrates that advocacy is often part and parcel of local projects and of setting local priorities for development, rather than only about international lobbying, campaigning, and summits. In the following, I present two examples of approaches to impact assessment concerned with high-level lobbying, drawing on work by Oxfam GB's Policy Department and by the New Economics Foundation.

In the past, the Oxfam Policy Department has tended to focus on the policy outcomes of its work, distinguishing between different stages of the advocacy process in the following way:

- 1 Heightened awareness about an issue
- 2 Contribution to debate
- 3 Changed opinions
- 4 Changed policy
- 5 Policy change is implemented
- 6 Positive change in people's lives

This approach postulates an implicit hierarchy of change, from getting an issue on the agenda of decision makers through to changing policies which eventually make a positive change for people living in poverty.

Both the authors of the NK and GSS case study and Oxfam are at pains to point out that they recognise that in reality, policy change is neither as linear or as predictable as these simple hierarchies suggest. However, one must recognise the usefulness in distinguishing between different stages in this way, and establishing indicators that can monitor progress. Clearly there are many cases where a change, or several changes, in practice or legislation trigger policy change, rather than vice versa — in fact, the importance of creating precedents (for instance, winning a particular victory such as the case of the Narmada dam) which may then lead to broader policy change (relating to all future dam construction) may be an central advocacy strategy. In a similar way, much advocacy, particularly local advocacy, may move directly from engaging on a general issue to changing practice and bringing about specific immediate benefits, such as successfully pushing for the sacking of a corrupt official.

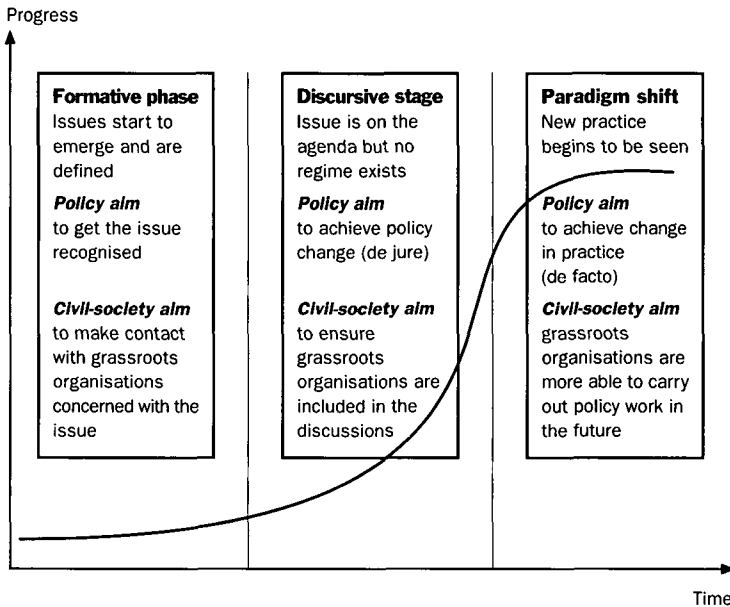
In its research on the effectiveness of NGO policy work the New Economics Foundation builds on the work of Jane Covey, among others. It proposes a framework for understanding the process of policy change that brings together the effects of advocacy both on policy and on the emergence of civil society or its ability organisations to undertake advocacy work (Covey 1996). The following kinds of questions can thus be addressed:

To what extent has the alliance, through its organisation and campaign strengthened the institutional base for citizen political action? Has it nurtured informed grassroots participation for the long haul, or simply mobilised groups for acts of protest? Has it contributed positively to an inclusive political culture, and public resolution of conflict through peaceful means? (Covey, quoted in NEF 1998)

NEF's model sets out a similar, but simpler, hierarchy of policy change to the Oxfam one shown above, and distinguishes between three different but overlapping phases. During the formative phase, issues begin to take shape and moves are made to place it on the policy agenda; at the discursive stage, the aim is to achieve policy change; and with the paradigm shift, new policy is implemented and practice changed.

Fig 6.1: The policy time line, with policy and civil-society aims

adapted from New Economics Foundation 1998



This model also elaborates the aims regarding civil-society participation in policy change, which is seen as part and parcel of the long-term advocacy agenda. Of course this process is unlikely to be as neat, ordered, and linear as this, but the time line does lay out an explicit model of change to be assessed.

An example of an assessment which uses this kind of framework is found in a study of advocacy work and the promotion of peace in East Timor and Angola by CIIR.³ This research takes forward the two dimensions of capacity-building and policy impact, differentiating between declaratory and implementation impact (similar to NEF's distinction between the discursive stage and the paradigm shift). CIIR define capacity-building impact as the extent to which an organisation has accumulated the necessary skills and resources to carry out effective advocacy and the extent to which they have translated this into action. Declaratory policy impact means the degree to which advocacy has produced a change in the rhetoric of decision-makers and in their legislation. Implementation impact refers to the extent to which new legislation has been translated into new administrative procedures or institutional practices.

CIIR also sought to distinguish between 'Northern' and 'Southern' outcomes for each of these dimensions,

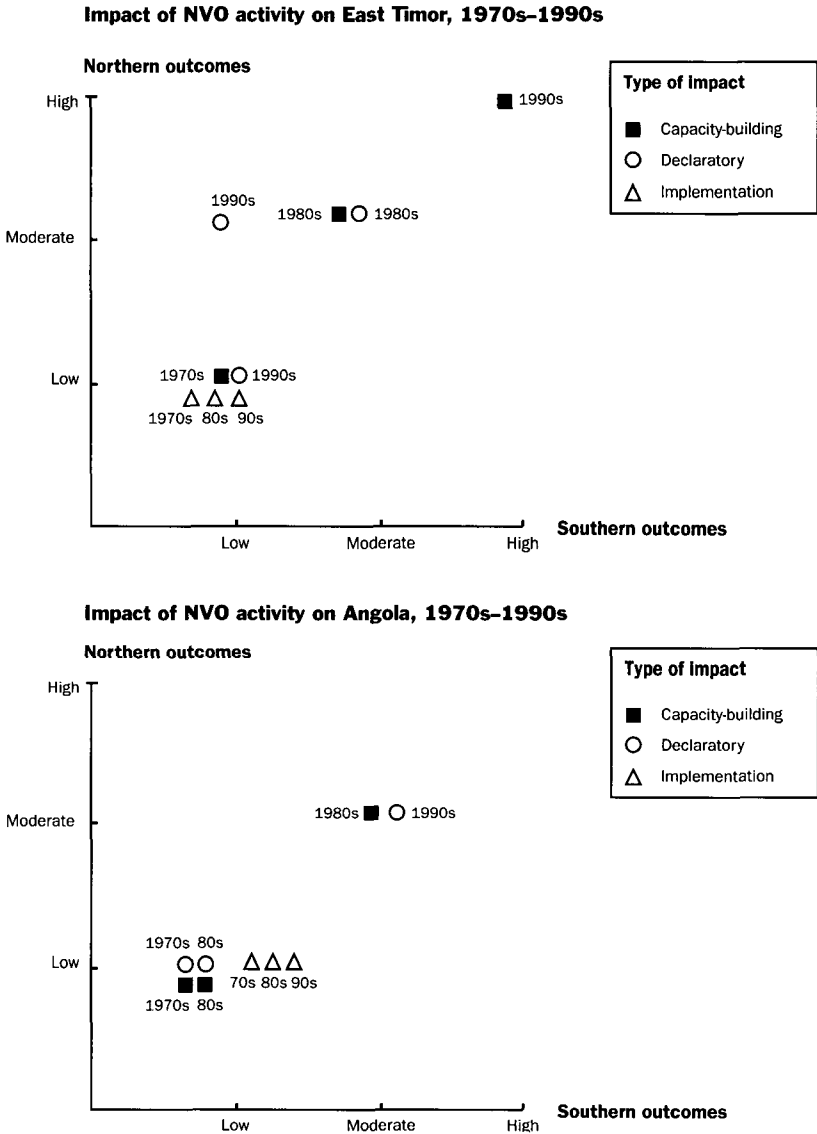
on the grounds that while it is important to assess the effect of NVO [Northern Voluntary Organisations] advocacy on Northern institutions, it is also important to ascertain what effect NVOs advocacy has had on the situation in the South. (CIIR 1997, p.6)

Figure 6.2 illustrates how this effect is rated on a scale from 'low' to 'high'. CIIR used a relatively simple graphic, with a range of symbols representing specific types of impact and annotations of these symbols to show change over time. The first graphic, for example, shows that capacity-building impact in both North and South has progressed positively over time in the case of East Timor; but implementation impact has remained low despite some change in rhetoric. In the case of Angola, progress on capacity-building has been more modest, and implementation is also low.

This model indicates how the crucial link between the 'advocate' and the 'client' can be explored, and the degree to which trade-offs between policy change and capacity-building may have occurred. In addition, it allows change over time and at different levels to be examined — for example, this approach could be used to explore differences between outcomes at the national and local level within a country. CIIR learned important lessons about the importance of generating public concern in the North; the need to focus on achievable policy goals; the requirement of establishing a clear division of labour between, and effective co-ordination of, grassroots organisations, development NGOs in the South and North, and policy institutes; and the need for campaigns of this nature to take a long-term view and be supported by adequate resources.

Figure 6.2: A model for rating the impact of advocacy work by Northern-based voluntary agencies (NVOs) (produced by CIIR)

Source: *Making Solidarity Effective* (Baranyi, Kibble, Kohen, O'Neill 1997)



These examples indicate that two broad dimensions of impact need to be explored — policy change and impact, and capacity-building and impact — within which more specific indicators can be developed, depending on the specific nature of the advocacy work undertaken. All assessments — whether examining local, micro-level advocacy work (NK/ GSS in Bangladesh and CYSD in India) or advocacy work on a wider, macro-level scale (NEF and CIIR) — suggest that it is important to look at these two dimensions together in order to explore the relationship and potential trade-offs between them. A recent study by Edna Co on advocacy for policy reform in the Philippines, commissioned by a group of Northern and Filipino NGOs, deliberately includes an assessment of the degree to which the advocacy work had equalised power relations and strengthened grassroots organisations and movements. Not only did this legitimise the advocacy work but ‘a grassroots constituency gave public actions credibility and effectiveness’ (Co 1999). Indeed, the sustainability of much advocacy work is dependent on local organisations ensuring that any agreed policy or practice is actually delivered.

However, these example also illustrate that although NGOs are starting to assess more than just the outcomes of advocacy work they still tend to concentrate on outcomes or effects (changes in policies or practices, or changes in capacity to advocate), rather than on ultimate impacts (significant changes in people’s lives). This is understandable, because — as in the case of CYSD — the ultimate impacts have yet to be felt. Presenting a reasoned argument for the likely or plausible impact, based on what has been achieved to date, is all that can be done. In some cases, the fact that a policy has been changed or that people feel more capable of advocating in the future can in itself be deemed an impact, because it can lead to significant changes in people’s self-confidence, self-belief or self-worth, even if other benefits that had been sought have not (yet) materialised. This is certainly the case in those communities in the CYSD study which specifically explored change in the degree and range of activities which communities believe they can accomplish.

It may impossible, unnecessary, or extremely cost-ineffective to demonstrate ultimate impacts, for instance in cases where one is trying to mitigate negative impacts. It is already medically established that vaccinating children against polio will have a significant effect on their lives (because it eliminates the possibility of them catching the disease); it is therefore sufficient to assess the outputs of a polio vaccination campaign, such as the proportion of children vaccinated every year, rather than demonstrate that a representative sample of children did not get polio as a result of the vaccination. Similarly, in the case of land mines it would probably not be possible, or necessary, to demonstrate — except through reasoned argument — that if fewer land mines are planted this will lead to fewer injuries or deaths. Rather, it will be necessary to ensure that policy and practice change actually leads to fewer land mines being planted (an

outcome rather than an impact). On other hand, if the ban on land mines does not lead to any changes in practice, as some fear, or if funds that would otherwise have gone to mine clearance are diverted, there may be a need to assess the impact of the campaign in these terms.

Assessing impact remains critical for advocacy work, not least because those involved must ensure that what they are doing actually makes a difference to people's lives, and that they can demonstrate this. There are enough examples of how changes in policy, practice, or legislation fail to lead to significant changes in people's lives. However, there may be occasions when the actual demonstration of impact, other than in the form of reasoned argument agreed by key stakeholders, is either unnecessary or too costly to make it worthwhile.

What are the units of assessment?

As the above examples show, several dimensions of impact can be explored in advocacy work through a range of units or levels of assessment. Impact assessment in case studies has tended to focus on the level of the individual, the household, the community and local NGOs, with less emphasis on the wider institutions which may be targeted by advocacy work. As the CYSD study described above reveals, this approach can give important insights into changes in the capacity of local organisations to undertake advocacy work, as well as into the ultimate impact of changes in the political, economic, and social environment. However, a list of critical success factors for advocacy at the macro level identified by Oxfam GB (see Summary 6.1) indicates that it is not only targeted lobbying which creates changes in policy and practice, but that influencing public opinion can play a crucial role. While this may not tell us directly about impact it helps to understand how particular outcomes, which may have achieved an impact in the past or are likely to do so in the future, were brought about.

Summary 6.1: Critical success factors for advocacy suggested by Oxfam GB

When Oxfam and its partner organisations have been most successful in bringing about policy and practice change through advocacy, this has been based on a number of critical factors:

- solid research and analysis and clear achievable propositions for policy change;
- credibility built on being able to link practical experience to broader policy issues — making micro-macro links;

- the ability to build upon past investments in local contacts, partner organisations, networks, and alliances (many of which had been built up over several years);
- the readiness and ability to seize sometimes unexpected opportunities to push for change;
- the involvement of credible, skilled, and experienced lobbyists, who have good intelligence about, and contacts within, the lobbying targets;
- excellent media work founded on good contacts with journalists.

For some issues — for example, on land mines, debt relief, or structural adjustment programmes — the generation of demonstrable public concern in both the North and the South has also been critical in creating a favourable environment for policy and practice change.

Source: 'Fundamental Review of Strategic Intent' (Oxfam GB 1998)

Table 6.2, building on a similar table in Chapter 3, attempts to synthesise some of the advantages and disadvantages in exploring impact with a range of stakeholders in the advocacy process. Clearly the balance between groups will depend on the purpose of the study and the nature of the advocacy work. However, sensible judgements about advocacy work should combine a good understanding of the inputs and outputs of the process as well as an estimation of the impacts. As the consultants who assessed Oxfam's advocacy work regarding the Great Lakes region, and who were unable to examine ultimate impacts in any systematic way, stated in their report:

Some NGOs use proxies to try and measure the effectiveness of their advocacy (how many press releases and briefing papers were sent out etc.). But these are output measures, which may show that people are working hard — but they have little to do with whether they are making an impact.

In this evaluation we have focused on interviewing people who have been on the receiving end of advocacy messages, because we felt this is what might be termed 'the least worst' method of evaluating advocacy. (Development Initiatives 1997)

In many NGOs the assessment of the worth of advocacy will ultimately depend on the reasoned judgement of senior managers. The perspectives of the actors included in the table below can present important information for making that judgement as well as being a means of cross-checking analysis — as explained later in the chapter, it is often in the interests of several of the parties involved, including NGOs themselves, to exaggerate their role in promoting policy change. However, as impact cannot be proved statistically or scientifically, managers will have to make a trade-off between devoting

resources to the assessment of impact and the actual advocacy work itself. This in turn will also help determine both the absolute number of individuals or organisations who might be involved in a process of impact assessment, as well as the proportion of contributions from stakeholders.

In broad terms, these stakeholders provide different perspectives on various parts of the ‘impact chain’: for instance, ultimate beneficiaries, local people, and local organisations are central to our understanding of ultimate impact or significant change in people’s lives. Staff from local and international organisations who are specifically involved in the advocacy which is being assessed can not only provide insights into the precise role they played but can often also compare and contrast the specific roles played by various agencies. The targets of advocacy – legislators and governments as well as their staff and civil servants — can give an important insight into what it felt like to be on the receiving end. Journalist and academics can give slightly different ‘outsider’ perspectives, while assessing public opinion can provide a useful barometer of direct and indirect changes in attitudes.

Table 6.2: Advantages and disadvantages of different units of assessment for examining the impact of advocacy work

Unit of assessment	Advantages	Disadvantages
Ultimate beneficiaries, at the individual and household level	Permits an understanding of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ultimate impacts and changes in people’s lives; • local capacity for collective action and advocacy; • sustainability of impacts. 	It may be difficult to link changes to advocacy outputs. A focus on this level may ignore other influences. It may be difficult to aggregate impacts.
Local NGO/ community-based organisation/ local activist groups	Permits an understanding of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • capacity for collective action and advocacy; • capacity to support and sustain changes at individual level; • the scope that has been created for advocacy; • impact of advocacy on community norms. 	Exact membership is sometimes difficult to assess. Dynamics within and between groups is often difficult to understand. It may be difficult to compare impact using quantitative data.

Table 6.2: Advantages and disadvantages of different units of assessment for examining the impact of advocacy work (continued)

Unit of assessment	Advantages	Disadvantages
Advocacy staff	<p>Permits an understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inputs to and outputs of the advocacy process; • perceived models and indicators of change as well as strategies for achieving it; • comparison of different agencies' roles. 	<p>Advocacy staff may tend to exaggerate their role, often to ensure their own organisational survival.</p> <p>Advocacy staff may be detached from others in the organisation who work with local actors.</p>
Decision-makers	<p>Gives insider perspective of policy process.</p> <p>Permits comparative analysis of different forces and influences for or against change.</p> <p>Can provide vital information for future strategies.</p>	<p>Decision-makers tend to exaggerate their role in promoting change.</p> <p>May be moved in the next cabinet reshuffle, election, or coup, and therefore not be a reliable guide to the future.</p>
Civil servants and agency staff	<p>May have longer-term perspective than politicians.</p> <p>Are often well placed to explain procedural and bureaucratic mechanisms and obstacles to policy change and implementation.</p> <p>May be able to expose inner workings and politics of organisation as well as disagreements which can be exploited in the future.</p>	<p>May not have access to overall understanding of policy process.</p> <p>May be naturally conservative in their views about future change.</p>

Table 6.2: Advantages and disadvantages of different units of assessment for examining the impact of advocacy work (continued)

Unit of assessment	Advantages	Disadvantages
Journalists	<p>Can give another perspective on the politics of the policy process.</p> <p>Can give insights into the inputs, outputs, and impact of media work in achieving change.</p> <p>May have access to insider information not available to others, as well as information on public attitudes and opinions.</p>	<p>May tend to sensationalise the mundane.</p> <p>Tendency to exaggerate their role in promoting change.</p> <p>May be unable to reveal sources and may need to 'trade' information for other favours.</p>
Academics, research and policy institutes	<p>Can give another perspective on the politics of the policy process.</p> <p>Can give insights into the inputs, outputs, and impact of academic and research work in achieving policy change.</p> <p>May have access to insider information not available to others, as well as information on public attitudes and opinions.</p>	<p>May tend towards an overly academic analysis of impact biased by their particular discipline.</p> <p>Tendency to exaggerate their role in promoting change, often for their own career purposes.</p> <p>May actually be isolated from reality of policy process and public opinion.</p>
Public opinion	<p>Gives an understanding of change in public attitudes, how this may have been brought about, and how they may have shaped decision-making and policy changes.</p> <p>Can in itself be used for advocacy work so as to demonstrate public concern.</p>	<p>Greater problems of attribution given that causality is difficult to untangle.</p> <p>Expensive to get representative view.</p> <p>Difficult to aggregate while retaining an understanding of differences of opinions between groups.</p>

What information already exists?

Once the model of change and the types of impact to be assessed are clear, the next step is finding out if the required information already exists. Apart from exploring project documents, official records and surveys, records of parliamentary debates, politicians' voting patterns in national assemblies, and public opinion polls can often provide evidence of changing opinions and attitudes as well as examples of action taken as a result. In some settings historical or anthropological material, newspapers, government and development agencies' reports, and so on may be all be relevant not only for determining what change has been brought about by a given project, but also for comparing past dissent and protest or lobbying capacity with the current situation. Although it may be very difficult to discover what caused these changes, such information can paint a backdrop to more focused impact work. In addition, it can help determine whether particular changes in opinion occurred widely in a given population or only in specific groups of people who may have been targeted by a campaign.

Who should be involved in the evaluation team?

The choice of evaluator or assessor will be subject to the same kinds of concern as raised in Chapter 3: it will depend on the level of experience available 'in-house', the degree of independence or 'objectivity' that certain stakeholders may demand, and the extent to which the exercise is viewed as a training or capacity-building process in its own right. Additionally, an impact assessment of advocacy initiatives needs to give thought to the evaluators' access to, and credibility with, advocacy targets if these are to be contacted. If evaluators are already known to the target, either personally or by reputation, this may gain them access to people who are invariably busy and may well have better things to do. Similarly an evaluator who does not respect people's time constraints, who behaves in an unprofessional way in an interview or consultation process, or who does not appear knowledgeable about the issue in question, not only risks collecting poor quality information, but can also undermine the credibility of the organisation commissioning the evaluator and thus its access and impact in the future.

The issue of baselines

Chapter 3 stated that where baseline information exists it can help track change over time, but that even if baseline data is collected it may not include information which is subsequently revealed to be important, or the information may not be organised in such a way as to make it accessible or

usable for comparisons. So although it is important to collect relevant baseline data which is appropriate to the desired change (see Summary 6.2) it is often necessary to reconstruct baseline data from project documents, other organisations, key informants, other stakeholders, and so on.

Summary 6.2: Key lessons for baseline data collection for advocacy work

- Aim to collect only information that is seen to be particularly relevant to assessing the outcome and impacts of the advocacy work and that will be difficult to collect through recall or baseline reconstruction methods.
- Collect only the amount of information that the organisation actually has the capacity to analyse, organise, and store.
- Make sure that the data collected is properly recorded, filed, and stored. The organisation must know where these files are held and what they contain, and have an adequate system for retrieving this information when it is needed.
- Recognise that it is impossible to predict all the information that might be needed and that any baseline will have to be updated.
- Explore the possibility of creating 'rolling baselines' by following changes in a particular number of people, groups, or advocacy targets over the life-time of the project.
- Explore the possibility of using new individuals, campaign groups, or targets which can act as a baseline for comparing existing participants.

In advocacy work — particularly in a policy environment which is subject to rapid and unpredictable change, where seizing new opportunities is critical to success, and where attribution is usually difficult to assess — the monitoring of ongoing change in the relationship between outputs and impact is likely to be more useful than extensive 'before and after' surveys. This suggests a greater emphasis on systematically recording ongoing evidence (both anecdotal and statistical) and making a reasoned assessment of past impact on a regular basis, than on collecting data on a large number of predetermined indicators. This is not to say that the latter is unnecessary but that it should not be done at the expense of ongoing impact tracking.

Dealing with attribution

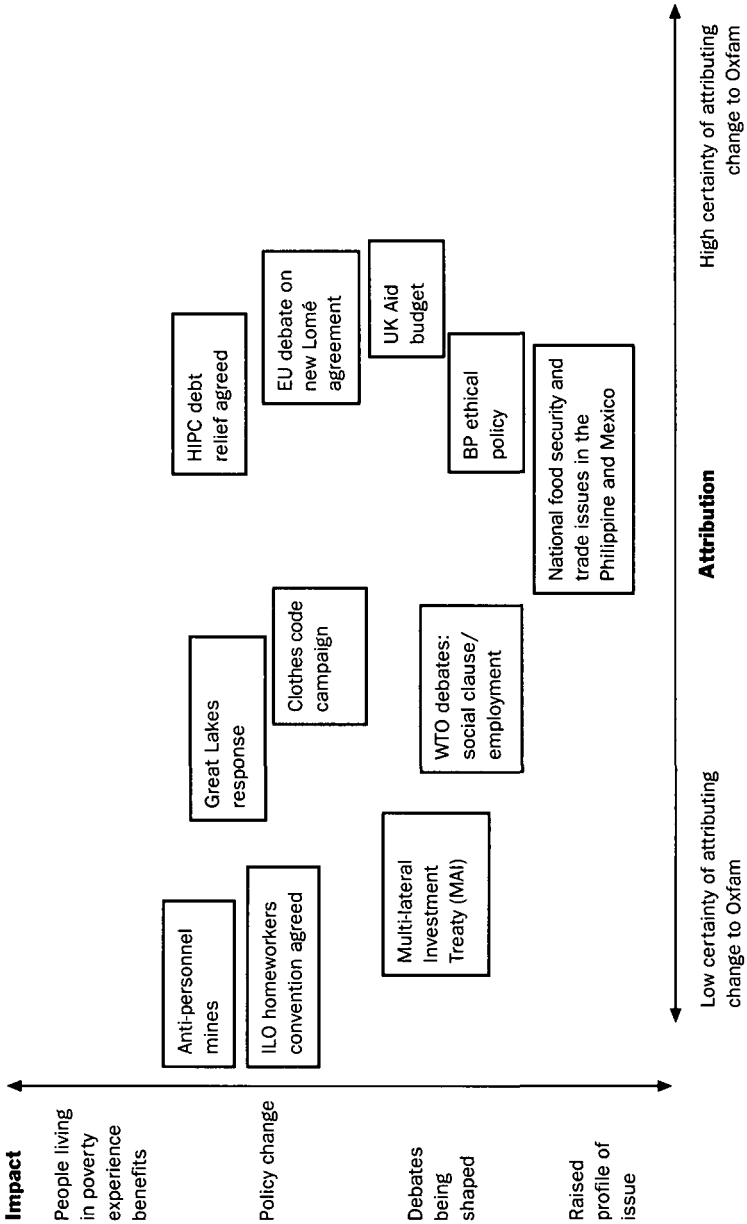
In Chapter 3 I looked at several ways of dealing with the problem of how to attribute change to a given intervention. I explored the use of control groups and non-project respondents; the possibility of searching for other explanations of change; and how secondary data and other key informants can help clarify attribution. For advocacy work the problem of attribution may be even more complicated, and the gap between action and ultimate impact even greater. An internal report written by Oxfam's Policy Department illustrates the problem.

The difficulty of attributing impact, in its ultimate sense (i.e. alleviating poverty, distress and suffering), to Policy Department work is fraught with difficulty. It would seem that we therefore need to be concentrating more on outcomes i.e. what we are willing to be held accountable to achieve and then providing a logical and reasoned account of what the consequences of us doing that are, in terms of wider impact. This means concentrating on something more than activities (workshops held, support visits made, publications produced) and something more specific than vague goals and objectives. It means focusing on what has changed or what is different as a result of an activity. This does not mean that, from time to time, we need not also to test our assumptions, for example by assessing the impact on people's health of the withdrawal of user fees in Zimbabwe. This however will only be possible where field programmes (or partner organisations) have the ability to assess impact at this level or where the impact and causal attribution is particularly clear. (Oxfam 1995)

Focusing on change rather than outputs, Oxfam's Policy Department has recently attempted to plot its major pieces of work in a graphic (Figure 6.3) along two axes: one represents a scale of impact (from profiling an issue, through changing policy to change in people's lives), the other charts an assessment of attribution.

This method is an attempt to disentangle the extent to which various agencies contributed to the success (or failure) of a particular campaign and the degree to which one can be certain about that finding. Since this will always be difficult to prove and will involve a subjective assessment it should be made explicit so that it can be challenged. It would then be interesting to compare and contrast the views of various agencies involved in the same campaigns to corroborate or contest these findings.

Figure 6.3: An attempt by Oxfam GB's Policy Department to assess impact and attribution of advocacy work



This approach has the merit of simplicity as well as a clear recognition of the importance of making judgements explicit. However, the case studies described earlier in the book suggest that this sort of approach could be usefully complemented by seeking out the views of non-project respondents and comparing them with those of people involved in the project. In the case of advocacy, this might include:

- comparing the views of decision-makers, politicians, or journalists targeted by advocacy work with those of their peers who were not targeted;
- comparing the opinions of members of the general public targeted by campaigning work with those of people who were not targeted;
- comparing the positions of individuals in countries where specific policy change has occurred with those in countries where it has not.

Although these groups are not strictly comparable (they are unlikely to have started off sharing the same views) allowances can be made for this. In addition to providing insights into what difference advocacy work has made in the past, this approach can also provide important information for the future. For example, in an assessment of the 1995 NGO campaign against aid cuts in the UK, discussions with members of parliament revealed important differences between those sympathetic to the NGO position and those less so, as well as a feeling that NGOs had failed to build a sufficiently broad coalition to defend the aid budget. As a result, in the following year institutions and organisations with an interest (such as trade unions and businesses) were more widely targeted, and the advocacy work was better tailored to the different interests and positions of the groups and individuals targeted.

Of course other variables in advocacy work combine to produce change: the national and political context; the media; changes within an organisation that NGOs are trying to influence; and continual changes within broader society. In building the case for attribution one must situate advocacy work within the context of these and other key variables. Only then can the question 'would this change have happened anyway?' be answered with a little more confidence.

The importance of cross-checking

The difficulties of attribution as well as the very nature of the advocacy process, where it may be in the interests of many of those involved to exaggerate their own role in promoting change (see Table 6.3 and the section on aggregation and interviews below), make cross-checking a vital part of assessing the impact of advocacy work. The Oxfam GB Guidelines for Advocacy state that

[i]mpact assessment always runs the risk of being influenced by an organisational or individual desire to stand out or to be seen as successful or to blame others for a lack of success. But advocacy monitoring or impact assessment may be exposed to manipulation beyond that ... advocacy monitoring is particularly vulnerable, because it takes place during a campaign. Different stakeholders may each have their own reasons to either exaggerate or downplay the impact of NGO advocacy. Do not expect a member of parliament or an official to give an honest answer to the question whether he/she believes that NGOs are effectively advocating a certain issue. The answer maybe 'yes', while in reality the person is trying to keep the NGOs' in a marginal position by making them believe they are successfully lobbying. The reverse can also happen. The impact of NGO advocacy can be ridiculed, precisely because it's influence is felt and to prevent it from becoming more successful. Just as the art of advocacy itself, advocacy impact assessment requires a high-level political consciousness and, practically, multiple sources of information to be cross-checked. (Oxfam GB 1998)

The methods of cross-checking explored in Chapter 3 — by employing a range of research methods, by comparing the findings of various researchers doing similar research, and by comparing respondents or sources of information — are all relevant to the assessment of advocacy work. Given the very different interests and levels of power of those involved as stakeholders in advocacy work, cross-checking can be an important means of exposing bias.

Summing up: The problem of aggregation

For many agencies involved in advocacy a critical question is what proportion of resources it should devote to specific types of advocacy work (research and lobbying, public campaigning, direct action, longer-term education, and so on), or indeed to advocacy work in general. Agencies would like to allocate their resources on the basis of what works, in other words what achieves greatest impact. Senior managers therefore often request information which allows them to compare the impact of different strategies, which requires an aggregation of findings from different campaigns and lobbying activities in ways that make them comparable. Given that often the allocation or re-allocation of resources is the ultimate purpose of this comparison, the tendency of those involved to exaggerate their role and impact is understandable. There may also be a resistance to aggregation across campaigns because it means simplifying reality. Campaigns are often, rightly, perceived as unique and not comparable with past or future work: strategies which may yield important results for debt relief may not work in a campaign against land mines or the small arms trade. One must not simplistically

replicate strategies that have worked in the past without considering a changing context and a changed subject area.

Chapter 3 outlined ways of summarising the findings of an impact assessment of an individual project which minimise the loss of the richness and diversity of the data collected, for example by allowing different stakeholders the opportunity to provide feedback on the aggregated findings; by ensuring that any report retains certain data in a disaggregated form; and by exploring means of communicating findings other than the usual report, such as participatory video, in order to retain the original voices and analysis of people themselves which can complement other data. While these ideas also hold good for advocacy work, an examination of its impact must take into account that policy change is the result of a combination of factors such as direct action, change in public opinion, media exposure, and insider lobbying. This may occur as the result of a single agency's work or, more commonly, through the work of several actors. Therefore any aggregation of advocacy work needs to retain a holistic understanding of the influencing process and the relationship between different strategies employed.

Table 6.3 offers an analysis of the anti-roads campaign in the UK, which has seen the virtual collapse of the roads lobby, a swing in public opinion against road building, and a transformation of the culture of the Department of Transport. In this case a diverse coalition of agencies was instrumental in achieving change, including professional research and lobbying bodies such as Transport 2000, environmental NGOs such as Friends of the Earth and the Council for the Protection of Rural England, as well as local and direct action groups such as Earth First and Reclaim the Streets. This combination of actors and the division of labour between them were beneficial to all of them, giving focus and credibility to each. Although the British government would not talk to certain groups because of their perceived links with direct action, they would meet with the professional research and lobbying groups, while the media interest generated by the direct action groups clearly strengthened the hand of the lobbyists too.

This evaluation does not look at impact in the sense of change in people's lives which has resulted from the policy and practice outcomes. However, it is useful to look at the outcomes of the range of generic advocacy methods employed and the relationship between them, in order to draw conclusions about the ultimate impact and what brought it about. Case studies carried out in similar ways may demonstrate the appropriateness of different advocacy mixes for specific issues. This approach — while recognising the need for aggregation — attempts to do so in a holistic way, rather than through a narrow functional division of information.

Table 6.3: Exploring the impact of various elements of the anti-roads campaign (UK)

Generic method	Features in campaign	Comments on outcomes
Professional research and lobbying	<p>Research from academic bodies, including government-appointed ones, invalidated the case for road-building.</p> <p>Transport 2000, an independent research and lobby organisation, presented a coherent analysis of the roads programme and had access to politicians.</p>	<p>The publication of one specific report was perhaps the most significant event in the campaign, because it refuted the road builders' main line of argument.</p> <p>It was essential that widespread opposition to roads was supported by credible alternative solutions.</p>
Lobbying by consumer groups and constituents	<p>Friends of the Earth and the Council for the Protection of Rural England led various lobbying campaigns.</p> <p>Lobbying through public enquiries soon proved ineffectual because of their anti-democratic nature.</p>	<p>Lobbying helped supplement active local opposition but was probably not significant in isolation.</p>
Surveys and petitions	<p>Over 13,000 people objected to widening the M25.</p>	<p>Not a significant feature of campaign.</p>
Local action	<p>A network of active local campaigning groups was linked through, and supported by, ALARM UK. 200 active groups linked to ALARM UK at its peak.</p> <p>Community groups generally folded once the local campaign was completed (obviously leaving residual opposition).</p>	<p>Local campaigning helped make the roads programme a soft target for cuts during a series of tough expenditure discussions in the British cabinet.</p> <p>Local action created splits in the ruling party (for example, members of the Conservative Party in areas affected by the M25 widening ended up opposing it).</p>

Table 6.3: Exploring the impact of various elements of the anti-roads campaign (UK) (continued)

Generic method	Features in campaign	Comments on outcomes
Direct action	From Twyford Down onwards, direct action was a significant, and apparently dominant, feature of a number of anti-roads campaigns.	Media interest kept the anti-roads campaign in the public eye. Direct action increased the cost of road building (for the government, not for contractors). But no roads were stopped by direct action; it followed local action and was only relevant in tandem with it.
	Through continual development of innovative campaigning stunts, activists maintained media interest and the high profile of the anti-roads campaign.	Significant only because it reflected existing public sentiment.
	Direct action probably only involved a couple of thousand activists, even at its height. Impact has almost certainly been overestimated.	

Assessing the ultimate impact of this advocacy might include exploring to what extent air quality and the incidence of respiratory diseases have changed as a result. This will vary for different groups of people: those living on busy roads may benefit if more by-passes are built, at least in the short term, whereas those living near the new by-pass may suffer. This underlines the importance of ensuring that in aggregating results that the views and situations of both winners and losers of policy change are included and not hidden from view.

Choosing tools and methods

Surveys

Chapter 4 shows that surveys are a useful way of gaining an overview of a given situation by collecting comparable and quantifiable data from a representative sample. Many of the issues arising from the case studies regarding questionnaires are relevant to assessing the impact of advocacy work, and I summarise them in the following.

Before carrying out a survey, it should be clarified how problems that arise during the course of data collection will be dealt with. For instance, if some respondents are unavailable during the survey period the lower than expected response might bias the results. Questionnaire surveys should concentrate on key issues asking questions such as *how many? what? how often? and when?*, rather than *why? and how?*, which are often better answered by less formal or structured methods. Adequate thought must be given to ensuring that the survey will seek not only to find out what change or impact has occurred, but also to verify the degree to which given interventions might plausibly have led to those changes.

The assessment team should recognise that surveys can be used to compare situations before and after a project or a campaign, which is a critical part of impact assessment. This can be done through simple ranking or scoring of people's perceptions now and some time ago, for example of their attitudes towards specific issues, their quality of life, or their capacity to influence others.

The choice of the number and type of respondents must be considered with care, particularly in relation to how representative they are of a given population; whether there is adequate coverage of various groups according to gender, age, and so on; the degree to which they should incorporate a control group; and the capacity of the organisation to actually analyse and summarise the results that emerge.

In addition, questionnaires should be pre-tested and refined before the survey is implemented, and assessors should consider carefully the selection of enumerators and ensure that they are properly trained and briefed.

Interviews

Recent evaluations of advocacy in which Oxfam GB has been involved⁴ chose to interview a range of people close to the policy-making process. The first example is an assessment of the 1995 inter-agency campaign of nine British NGOs to prevent cuts in the official aid budget. This assessment was undertaken by external consultants over a six-week period and involved interviews with 23 people on an unattributable basis, half of them carried out face-to-face, half on the telephone; discussions lasted between 20 minutes and two hours. The evaluation focused on how key decision-makers and decision-formers who were targeted by NGOs (ministers, Members of Parliament, Chairs of select committees, civil servants and parliamentary advisers, journalists, opposition spokespersons, and academics) rated the actions of the various NGOs, their effectiveness in influencing the levers of power, their accuracy, and their timing.

The second case is an evaluation of Oxfam's advocacy and communications work on the Great Lakes region of Africa during the period from 1994 to 1996. This involved over 50 interviews, both within Oxfam, among its peers, and with key decision-makers and other observers. It thus looked at internal processes of policy formulation as well as the external effects of advocacy.

The third example is a request to Kenneth Clarke, former British Chancellor of the Exchequer, to give Oxfam feedback on its debt-relief campaign in which he was a key target.⁵ Although again these examples do not directly evaluate ultimate impact, they do teach important lessons about the potential of interviewing advocacy targets in order to understand one part of the advocacy 'impact chain'. This approach has proved a relatively cost-effective way of talking to a small sample of the key audience for lobbying, asking them what changed as a result, and finding out what was the most effective means in achieving this. The costs of doing this in a more extensive or statistically valid way may be prohibitive and unnecessary, particularly when 'insider' lobbying is involved. By giving direct feedback from a lobbying target to those conducting an advocacy campaign this method has provided useful insights into the following areas:

- How one agency's advocacy is perceived compared with that of other agencies working on the same issue, and whether stakeholders can actually distinguish between them. For example, Oxfam discovered that civil servants often find it more difficult to distinguish between its lobbying and that of other agencies than politicians or journalists who were often able to recall what specific actions they had taken as a result of Oxfam's lobbying.
- How Oxfam's and other NGOs' advocacy, for example on debt, affected the British government's position as well as that of other actors such as the World Bank and the IMF.
- How NGO advocacy is used by its targets in their own advocacy, for example by the British government to strengthen their hand in negotiations on debt relief with other G7 countries.
- What kind of advocacy strategies politicians welcome and which strategies may be counterproductive.
- What strategies are likely to be more effective in the future (for instance, suggestions were made to use more personal lobbying rather than sending letters, briefing papers, and so on).
- When a campaign would need to start in order to fit better with existing decision-making processes.
- What other actors could add political weight to a given campaign.

As noted in previous chapters, people are sometimes economical with the truth and politicians may try to put a particular 'spin' or interpretation on events that makes them look good. For example, Kenneth Clarke describes Oxfam's lobbying as 'supportive' and 'helpful' in taking forward an initiative where 'Oxfam was pushing at an open door as far as John Major and I were concerned', whereas the Oxfam Campaigns Department's constituency contact during the multilateral campaign recalls that when the concept of debt relief was first raised with Kenneth Clarke in 1987 he dismissed the idea as 'Mickey Mouse economics'.⁶ This demonstrates not only how far attitudes and policies had changed but also how key advocacy targets may be unwilling to admit this, at least in public. Indeed, as Clarke stated in his letter to Oxfam,

[i]n all lobbying it is always a good idea to acknowledge that the Government is being helpful, and a little recognition of what is being done makes the lobbying more welcome. (letter, Kenneth Clarke 1997)

This also suggests that key lobbying targets may have a tendency to downplay the impact of a particular campaign or lobby in order to demonstrate the importance of their own efforts and in order to discourage the perception that they can be easily influenced. Once again this suggests that a healthy dose of scepticism and a strategy to cross-check findings from a variety of perspectives are important components of any impact assessment process.

Analysis of interviews must happen during or soon after a particular campaign has ended or a particular breakthrough has been achieved, in order for interviewees to be able to remember the process of decision-making and what influenced it, and also in order for the agency to maximise the utility of the findings so that strategies can be adapted accordingly. However it may be the case that politicians who are no longer in power, or civil servants who are no longer in post, can offer a more objective and honest account of decision-making than those still involved.

Finally the distillation of semi-structured interviews of the type used, means that researchers impose some interpretation. Any report should make it clear where there are differences of opinion and where the judgement of evaluators differ from the views reported.

When interviews are not possible

The Seeds Action Network and Indigenous Woodland Management projects run by ENDA-Zimbabwe both sought to influence other organisation's approaches to the environment. However they found assessing their effect on these organisations one of the most difficult aspects of the case study. Initially they had wanted to visit and interview staff within those institutions, but by that stage of the impact work, they could not afford to do so. Instead a

questionnaire was sent out by mail to NGOs, government departments, and other institutions which the community had identified as being active in the district, or which the researchers felt might need or find useful some of the data generated by the project. Fifty questionnaires were sent out, but only two responses were received, even after a telephone follow-up.

One of the reasons why the response to the questionnaire was so poor was that most people who were familiar with the projects had left and were difficult to trace.

In looking for institution level impacts it became clear that only those individuals who had direct contact with the project could attempt to respond to the questionnaire. When one considers that most people do not have the forum within their institutions to readily share experiences from workshops, this is not entirely unexpected. (ENDA case study)

This illustrates how short institutional memories can be and what difficulties one will encounter in following and tracing changes through key informants if one waits too long.

Eight months later, ENDA secured funding to pursue this activity again. A new methodology was developed in which the research team would visit the libraries of institutions doing similar work and look for texts published by ENDA as well as citations of the two projects being assessed. They would try to create a listing of how often the results of these studies have been used. (This involved establishing which were the key texts that ENDA had produced for the two projects in question.) It was assumed that the number of organisations making use of the project publications would be a good indicator of the extent of ENDA's influence at the institutional level.

Although it was possible to establish if these reports were present it was, unfortunately, not possible to establish if and when these reports had been used; sometimes it was difficult to actually locate them. Most of the libraries were for reference use only, so books were not loaned out, or the organisations in question were in the process of setting up their libraries, so material had not been sorted. Further, many of the libraries were not computerised and as such did not have a database of the material present. This led to a substantial amount of time being spent on manually searching for the publications. The evaluators encountered an additional problem: some project reports were not widely distributed or, as is usual in many organisations, they had found their way on to someone's desks and gone no further. More success was met in seeking where ENDA was cited in the bibliographies of relevant material: a total of ten citations were found, including two theses.

Although this approach allowed ENDA to conclude that it had had some kind of influence on other institutions and it was encouraging to note that

ENDA project documents had found their way onto library bookshelves, it was difficult to ascertain what changes had been brought about as a result, or how attributable these were to ENDA. It was clear that after its Indigenous Woodland Management Project, other NGOs and institutions had embarked on similar projects or programmes. ENDA can therefore infer that they may have had some influence on the inception of these projects — but not much more. Clearly this approach can be a useful adjunct to other types of assessment, but it will only be cost-effective where library records or citation indexes are computerised and thus allow rapid searches.

Observation

Chapter 4 shows that observation can be a useful tool in assessing the quality of relationships between individuals or groups. It can therefore also have a role in the field of advocacy, particularly in assessing the changed capacity to influence as well as changed behaviours or actions of those being influenced. Bob Hammond's observation cited above of Kenneth Clarke's changed attitude and language regarding the issue of developing countries' debt is a good example.

Observation is not just about sitting in on meetings, observing changed behaviour or ways of living in a community, or observing change over time; it is also about keeping one's eyes open on all occasions to changes that are occurring and recording them. The following comments made by two supermarket chains in the UK about Fair Trade issues are a good example of observed changes in behaviour, and at least rhetoric. In the summer of 1994, Sainsbury's reported that 'a handful of letters arrive every day asking about ethically traded goods'. One year later, Safeway stated that 'if people don't buy it then we don't sell it and it is as simple as that'. In the autumn of 1996, Safeway had changed their mind: 'It's not about a niche market any more. It's about making sure that all products in all superstores in Britain are ethically produced'. And in spring 1997 Sainsbury's said: 'We are responding to public demand' (in developing a code of conduct).

This sort of data provides useful evidence of change which can lead to further questions such as: what brought it about? Has it led to real changes in purchasing policy? What is the ultimate impact it has had on poor producers? However, this approach also means being alert to change and disciplined enough to record it. Good observation and recording are skills which can be developed, and which need adequate preparation. Preparing for advocacy work might make use of the following basic questions:

- What specific changes in behaviours and actions are hoped for and are observable?
- Who should be observed (for example, the lobbying target, those whose capacity has been built, ultimate beneficiaries, the public at large)?

- How should they be observed — as participant or onlooker, overtly or covertly, through public or private statements?
- When should they be observed — at particular events, times of the day, or seasons?
- How should these observations be recorded and communicated — notes, tape-recording, video, by other means?

RRA and PRA/ PLA tools

The potential for adapting participatory tools and methods for the assessment of advocacy work appears large, although neither the case studies or other examples previously cited have specifically used the tools in this way. What follows are examples of similar work that has been done which seems to lend itself to a participatory approach undertaken at different levels: with beneficiaries, advocacy staff, or with other agencies and stakeholders.

Time lines

Time lines are a useful way of situating specific projects in a longer historical time-frame (see Chapter 4). Emergency and development work often needs to reconstruct the history of a given project as well as the context in which it evolved, partly because of weak baseline data and poor record-keeping, but also because of changing circumstances and a revised understanding of what information is relevant. Constructing this history is particularly important for advocacy work which seeks to bring about policy changes over a long period. Additionally — given the difficulties of attribution mentioned above — time lines such as that in Table 6.4 can help set out the outputs and potential impacts so that the relationship between the two can be explored.

Table 6.4 covers five years of Oxfam's involvement in campaigning for debt relief and attempts to record outputs directly related to the campaign, as well as other closely related work. A separate column summarises the effects of advocacy and information on impact, including a mixture of quantitative data from commissioned polls of public opinion; qualitative data elicited from lobbying targets; qualitative and quantitative data relating to the process of policy change and the timing and scale of the changes introduced; and observed events which Oxfam considers important indicators of progress towards impact. These include, for example, the President of the World Bank's comments to the Ethiopian minister, or the fact that the UK Treasury had to print proforma responses to cope with the numbers of campaign postcards it was receiving urging it to take action.

In fact, the last column provides us with no impact data in the sense of ultimate change in people's lives. Clearly questions remain about whether the policy

changes that have occurred will ultimately lead to a significant impact, and about the degree to which these changes were attributable to Oxfam, pressure from NGOs in general, or the general economic and political climate. But this systematic collection and presentation of information can at least be a starting point to answering such questions and tracking change over time. For instance, in the near future it should be possible to determine whether promised debt reduction has led to increased expenditure on health and education services in Uganda, and whether this is correlated with improved health statistics.

If other agencies involved in advocacy on debt were to construct similar time lines one could compare perceptions of the change process as well as the complementarity between different levels and types of change. This would need to include local Ugandan or Honduran agencies involved in the establishment of local debt-relief advocacy networks and relevant government officials, as well as advocacy agencies and targets in the North. This might not only be a useful way of cross-checking perceptions but also help to deepen all the agencies' understanding of the different roles they played.

Table 6.4: Time line of Oxfam's campaign on debt 1993-99

Date	Oxfam campaign outputs	Outcomes/ effects/ impact
1993	<p>Launch of 'Africa Make or Break' report and campaign in the UK.</p> <p>338 MPs contacted in person or by letter.</p> <p>Letters to John Major, British Prime Minister. Visits to Kenneth Clarke, UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, and meeting with Lynda Chalker, UK Minister for Overseas Development.</p> <p>Letters sent to Clarke prior to IMF/ WB meeting.</p> <p>Letters sent to Japanese Finance Minister calling for adoption of Trinidad Terms.</p>	<p>President of World Bank asks Ethiopian Minister: 'Have you read the Oxfam report?'</p> <p>Cross-party MP caucus to promote debt relief formed in British Parliament.</p> <p>Clarke backs Trinidad Terms at World Bank/ IMF autumn meetings in Washington DC.</p> <p>15,000 letters from Africa presented to WB/ IMF finance ministers.</p> <p>G7 Economic Summit in Tokyo: debt on the agenda, but no agreement on Trinidad Terms.</p>

Table 6.4: Time line of Oxfam's campaign on debt 1993-99 (continued)

Date	Oxfam campaign outputs	Outcomes/ effects/ impact
1993	<p>UK media stunt drawing on image of the four horsemen of the apocalypse.</p> <p>Oxfam partner/ overseas staff visits: public meetings and local media coverage.</p>	<p>10% public awareness of 'Africa Make or Break' campaign among top socio-economic groups A & B (6% of total UK population).</p> <p>More than 40 features in UK press since campaign was launched.</p> <p>30,000 statements of support delivered to Prime Minister's home in Downing Street, and 4,000 campaign messages from Oxfam donors sent.</p>
1994	<p>Campaign postcards to Clarke about Uganda debt.</p> <p>Visits to British MPs about Uganda debt.</p> <p>Lobbying visits to candidates in the European parliamentary election in 50 constituencies.</p> <p>Campaign 'birthday card' to the World Bank President about health user fees.</p> <p>Visits to Japanese Embassy in London and Edinburgh.</p>	<p>British MPs make follow-up visit to Clarke, and UK Treasury has proforma responses printed to reply to campaign postcards.</p> <p>Economic Secretary to the Treasury says in the House of Commons that debt relief for Uganda 'has been raised by many of our constituencies'.</p> <p>WB/ IMF Summit in Madrid: Clarke puts forward proposals to sell IMF gold stocks to reduce debt repayments of some heavily indebted countries, including Uganda.</p> <p>G7 Economic Summit in Naples: agreement to reduce debt-stocks and to move beyond a 50% limit on debt write-off, but no agreement on gold stocks.</p>

Table 6.4: Time line of Oxfam's campaign on debt 1993-99 (continued)

Date	Oxfam campaign outputs	Outcomes/ effects/ impact
1995	<p>Oxfam's Basic Rights campaign launched.</p> <p>Letters to Clarke expressing concern about debt.</p>	<p>WB/ IMF meeting: UK proposal on gold stock sales submitted. Similar motion on sale of gold stocks presented to G7 Summit.</p> <p>Uganda gains two-thirds reduction on bilateral debt repayments.</p>
1996	<p>Oxfam's Constituency Contacts visit MPs and candidates across the UK lobbying on debt, trade, and aid in the run-up to UK general election.</p> <p>Oxfam report published: 'Debt relief and poverty reduction: New hope for Uganda'.</p> <p>Letters to Clarke about improving the terms and speeding up the implementation of the debt initiative.</p>	<p>At G7 meeting, Germany blocks gold stock sale; no agreement reached on bilateral debt.</p> <p>WB/ IMF meeting in Washington DC agrees Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, increasing potential bilateral debt write-off from 67% to 80% and including provision for multilateral debt relief funded by IMF and WB (equals \$80m per year in debt relief for Uganda).</p> <p>Letter from Clarke: 'It only remains for me to thank you for Oxfam's encouragement and support over the last two years. I am very grateful for your help in getting the initiative off the drawing board to the point of implementation.'</p> <p>Clarke and UK Director of IMF comment on number of letters they have received.</p>

Table 6.4: Time line of Oxfam's campaign on debt 1993-99 (continued)

Date	Oxfam campaign outputs	Outcomes/ effects/ impact
1997 and spring and summer 1998	<p>Intensive lobbying on Uganda with respect to delays in receiving HIPC debt relief.</p> <p>Oxfam Constituency Contacts make 102 visits to MPs urging them to write to Tony Blair, new British Prime Minister, asking how the UK government will check its progress towards the 2015 goals (part of which is debt relief for poverty reduction).</p> <p>Oxfam GB issues briefing papers and public information materials on poor country debt relief: on debt relief for Mozambique and Tanzania (launched with Julius Nyerere); on the impact of debt and poverty on children.</p> <p>Jubilee 2000 and Debt Crisis Network (of which Oxfam is a member) merge to form a broader, more effective alliance.</p>	<p>After lengthy delays, WB and IMF approve debt relief of \$900m for Bolivia, Burkina Faso, and Uganda.</p> <p>Letter from Kenneth Clarke to his Oxfam Constituency Contact states that the campaign gave credibility and impetus for reform, and galvanised key individuals to take action which they might not otherwise have taken.</p> <p>British Department for International Development White Paper asserts that radical debt relief is necessary to meet 2015 poverty targets.</p> <p>70,000 people form a 'human chain' at G8 Summit in Birmingham to illustrate 'break the chain of debt' campaign theme.</p>
Autumn 1998	<p>Campaign mailing urging UK Chancellor to take action at IMF and World Bank autumn meetings to ensure investment in human development within HIPC.</p>	<p>IMF and WB autumn meetings: further review of HIPC agreed in broad terms.</p>
Winter 1998	<p>Campaign mailing calls for debt relief for Nicaragua and Honduras following Hurricane Mitch; briefing paper on Central America links debt to reconstruction and development after natural disaster.</p>	<p>Substantial media coverage on Central America also clearly makes link between debt and the catastrophe of Mitch.</p> <p>Debt servicing suspended for Nicaragua and Honduras.</p>

Table 6.4: Time line of Oxfam’s campaign on debt 1993-99 (continued)

Date	Oxfam campaign outputs	Campaigns outputs
Spring 1999	<p>Launch of Oxfam's Education Now campaign: first phase links debt and education.</p> <p>Oxfam makes formal submissions to the HIPC Review, showing how investment in human development could be ensured.</p> <p>Direct letter, postcard, and email actions to Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer, urging him to 'drop the debt' at the G8 Cologne summit.</p> <p>177 MPs visited by Constituency Contacts on education and debt.</p>	<p>Widespread media coverage in UK. The Guardian praises 'new' Oxfam angle linking debt to impact on poor people's access to education.</p> <p>First stage of the HIPC Review recognises failings in HIPC and highlights Oxfam's and other NGOs' alternatives.</p> <p>Oxfam presents its approach to Gordon Brown and Clare Short, Secretary of State for International Development.</p> <p>UK government proposals on HIPC for the HIPC Review strongly support debt and poverty linkages, as well as broader improvements to HIPC.</p>
Summer 1999	<p>Hand-over of action cards linking education and debt to Downing Street prior to G8 Summit in Cologne.</p> <p>Campaigners and Oxfam International supporters join Jubilee 2000 supporters at G8 summit and at 'human chain' events in the UK.</p> <p>About 25,000 signed action cards collected at UK pop festivals linking IMF to debt; new Oxfam supporters write to Michel Camdessus, IMF Managing Director, about debt relief delivery at IMF autumn meeting.</p>	<p>Downing Street call Oxfam to enquire about number of Oxfam cards handed over.</p> <p>At the Cologne Summit, G7 agree important changes to HIPC initiative which will speed up and increase debt relief to eligible countries</p> <p>Tony Blair mentions Oxfam in House of Commons, following G7 debt agreement.</p>

Ranking

The full range of ranking methods (wealth ranking, problem ranking, performance ranking and satisfaction matrices, and impact ranking) described in Chapter 4 can all be useful in exploring the significant differences within groups or communities that need to be taken into account when exploring impact.

As discussed in the section on aggregation, organisations may face great difficulty in choosing between different advocacy strategies on the basis of impact; they therefore find it hard to allocate resources on this basis. The process of ranking and comparing the merits of different approaches, projects, or strategies offers one way of doing this. More importantly, it can make explicit the different criteria that people may have for comparing approaches — a critical step in starting a dialogue and defining clear success criteria.

Venn Diagrams or chapati diagrams: influence and power

The example of the use of Venn diagrams in Chapter 4 shows the perceived relationships of villagers in India with internal and external institutions and how these has changed over time. In this case, the relationships were symbolised by the distance of symbols representing the institutions from the central symbol, which represented the community. The respondents were asked to do this for the current situation and as it was a number of years before.

Given that advocacy is fundamentally about seeking to influence relationships of power and changing the ability of people living in poverty to influence decisions that affect their lives, tools that facilitate discussions about changes in relationships over time will be particularly useful. This use of Venn diagrams may be appropriate in the following situations:

- in assessing changes in the ability of groups or organisations to influence different institutions;
- in assessing the changes in linkages and coalitions between those carrying out advocacy work on similar or related issues;
- in mapping changing relationships between actors in the policy-making process, for example in assessing their relative influence on or proximity to decision-makers.

Such tools not only allow an assessment of past change but can also help to identify 'levers' or 'pressure points' to promote change in the future. Recent experience in using Venn diagrams to explore the perceived access of different groups to decision-making⁷ indicates that they can be a powerful means of indicating exclusion and providing a visual trigger for discussion. However it was also found that, like other techniques of this kind, unequal power relations within the groups constructing the diagram determines what

is and is not represented, and that the very nature of the exercise can create artificial or unhelpful boundaries between institutions or groups. If the diagrams and its subsequent discussion are to be shared between groups or made public, thought must be given to the effect that this is likely to have on other groups represented in the diagram.

Impact flow charts and trend analysis

These tools, as illustrated in Chapter 4, are useful for indicating the impact of a given intervention, policy change, or event and for documenting changes over time. The impact flow chart done by the men in Yiziiri village in northern Ghana (Figure 4.2) indicates the significant impact that a government immunisation scheme was perceived to have on not only health, but also on food security, income, and education. This tool can therefore help in identifying the potential impact of future policy change, as well as an analysis of past policy changes. This is particularly helpful in identifying future negative impacts, which may not have been anticipated, as well as identifying less obvious secondary impacts that may have occurred.

Similarly, the trend analysis from Demon village in Ghana (Table 4.18) is a good illustration of the impact of conflict in relation to other dimensions of people's lives and how these have changed over several years. From the point of view of advocacy impact assessment, trend analysis can provide a simple way of understanding relative change in people's lives over time, which can then be linked to particular policy changes. In addition, a better understanding of relative levels of change over time should help determine whether policy changes actually make a difference to existing trends. This is a critical issue for impact assessment in that it allows some analysis of the counter-factual (in other words, what would have happened anyway without any change in policy), a particularly tricky problem.

Participatory tools and methods thus hold some unexplored possibilities for impact assessment of advocacy work, both in exploring the process of policy change and its impact, but also in exploring changes in the ability of people living in poverty to advocate their own agenda and to influence others. Perhaps, as recent experiences with participatory poverty assessments suggest, they also hold the key to the difficult task of relating changes in policy to changes in people's lives. However, all the concerns about participatory methods outlined in Summary 4.5 remain relevant.

Other participatory tools

The use of theatre and video to give people a 'voice' rather than a 'message' is a means to strengthen their ability to advocate for desired changes. Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed and Legislative Theatre, which focuses on

participatory means of devising and changing laws, are two examples.⁸ The use of theatre and video for evaluating the impact of advocacy work is still in its infancy, but experiences with using these tools for evaluative purposes⁹ show their potential in providing feedback on how policy is actually implemented in practice which would otherwise have been difficult for the communities to air in a more formal way. This feedback can have an effect on changing matters at the same time. For example, Malian villagers staged plays depicting how members of the forestry service behave towards them. The Forestry Chief heard about these plays and took steps to reduce the repressive measures that his forestry officers were using. In this case, the plays acted as a means to assess policy implementation and to change aspects of it simultaneously.

Case studies, combined methods, and sequencing

Chapter 4 set out that case studies are an approach to gathering comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information about one or more cases of interest. Since they are particularly valuable where broad, complex questions have to be addressed and where the number of variables is usually be greater than can be controlled for, they are especially relevant to advocacy work.

Creating case studies will usually mean breaking down the component parts of advocacy work into various, overlapping elements such as specific projects or programmes or campaigns; specific policies; specific institutions or targets; specific countries or regions; specific clients of beneficiaries.

This will allow cases to be selected, depending on the purpose of the impact assessment and the kinds of case study being undertaken (see Table 4.19). Much advocacy work is unique, so a case-study approach to assessing impact offers a number of advantages. However, it would be a mistake to assume that this uniqueness prevents learning about impact from a number of cases. Over time synthesis studies or cross-case analysis, which attempt to draw wider, more generic lessons will be useful. Their quality will be improved if case studies ask key common questions (focusing on change over time and what has caused it), or if a variety of cross-cutting case studies using a range of perspectives is chosen (for example, one looking at a particular campaign, one looking at specific targets, on looking at a particular group of clients).

The examples in this chapter use three ways to look at the impact of advocacy and policy work. The first analyses projects and campaigns which are designed to alter policies by investigating their inputs and outputs, and by predicting or explaining, through logic and reasoned argument, the general effects or impacts that these changes have had or will have on people's lives. The second approach concentrates more on assessing the degree to which the abilities of others, and of people living in poverty in particular, have been

enhanced and what this allows them to do and to achieve. The third approach examines how policies are implemented in practice and what the actual, specific impact on different people's lives is; this can usually only be done in a limited way or through a case study, by sampling the population in question.

It is a major challenge to bring these different approaches together in order to make an overall assessment of impact. Earlier examples from NEF and CIIR indicate ways forward on combining the first two, but to date, relatively little seems to have been done in ensuring that the third element is properly integrated. However, there is a growing number of attempts which combine participatory research methods that explore the impact of policy with an assessment of the policy-making process itself that at the same time seeks to strengthen the voices of those involved.¹⁰ These offer an intriguing glimpse of possible ways forward.

Conclusion, lessons learned, and ideas for the future

Several agencies' work in this field points to similar general lessons regarding the assessment of advocacy work.

Be clear about advocacy objectives. Even if it is difficult to assess impact, it should at least be possible to explain lucidly what one is trying to achieve. Without this, even 'management by deviation' (in other words, focusing on *why* plans were changed and introducing accountability after the event), as opposed to management by objectives (which can lead to sticking over-zealously to predetermined plans), is very difficult. Much advocacy work is non-routine, so the gradual accumulation of knowledge by repetition does not happen. Learning by examining the deviation between planned and actual activities may provide an attractive substitute. This might mean placing as much emphasis on developing more internal learning and monitoring systems as on external evaluation; and it also means investigating the unexpected or unpredictable outcomes and spin-offs that are an inevitable part of any project.

Do the simple monitoring well. NGOs should record the concrete inputs and outputs of the work so that they can at least be held accountable for these, if not entirely for the final impact. This monitoring needs to include tracking relevant changes in the external environment.

Take every opportunity to record and log concrete evidence of outcomes and impact. In the all too frequent absence of 'hard' quantitative data, it is crucial to be systematic about collecting, and active in reporting, 'anecdotal' evidence of impact as well as any available evidence that can help deal with the attribution question.

Assessments need to provide useful and timely information. Those involved need fast, appropriate information so that strategies can be shifted and activities adapted in an effective way. In a fast-moving policy environment this is essential. Although post-hoc evaluations may be appropriate from time to time, monitoring and learning by doing is vital.

Impact assessment of advocacy will always be more of an art than a science. Subjective judgements about the value of advocacy work will continue to be important. Cross-checking those judgements by asking the 'audience' and the 'client' some key questions will be a critical means of ensuring veracity and credibility. Summary 6.3 builds on questions that Rick Davies has drawn up in order to assess impact and attribution.

Summary 6.3: Key questions for assessing advocacy work with clients and audiences

Audience	Client
Who was supposed to hear the message?	If clients are not already working with the NGO, how are they contacted in order to ensure that the NGO is acting appropriately on their behalf?
Who has heard the message?	To what extent have NGOs shared their advocacy activities with the people they are working with?
How did they interpret the message?	Has there been any attempt to get beneficiaries to rank advocacy work against other activities which they might see as more relevant?
How was it different from other messages?	What effort has there been made to provide feedback to intended beneficiaries about the results of advocacy work?
What did they do in response?	To what extent do beneficiaries feel more confident about their capacity to advocate on their own behalf?
Have they heard of the sender/ advocate?	What effort has been made to seek people's assessment of results and get their confirmation of assumed impact?
How do they differentiate the sender/ advocate from others who might be communicating similar messages?	

Adapted from Rick Davies (1997)

Finally, there is some potential for impact assessment to become an important tool for advocacy itself. Several of the results of the case studies — in Wajir, Ikafe, Matson, and Ghana — are being used to promote change of policy and practice, or at least discussions are taking place about how the results can be so used. The very nature of impact assessment, its focus on change and what is ultimately important in people's lives, generates information not just about the impact of a single intervention but about people's overall quality of life and its determinants. Government and donor policies were often cited as particularly important in promoting significant positive changes, for example in health and education. In some cases they were also identified as having negative effects through the withdrawal of services, poor co-ordination, and lack of transparency. The more impact assessment can be seen, and used, in this way, the more likely it is that its full potential for development will be realised and its cost-effectiveness improved.

7

Impact assessment and organisations¹

This chapter looks at some of the theory and the practice of organisational assessment; in particular, I present examples of organisational self-assessment and ways of assessing collective action, leadership, and sustainability. The second half of the chapter considers the challenges facing organisations in designing impact assessment systems, as well as the best practice emerging in this area. The chapter concludes by analysing the effect of these impact studies on the organisations involved and suggests that, overall, there is a need for greater mutual assessment between agencies in order to assess how together they can achieve more.

The preceding chapters in this book have all alluded to the role that organisations play in the process of achieving, or failing to achieve, impact. These organisations include informal groups or community organisations, intermediary NGOs, local and national governments, international NGOs, international donors, and many other public and private sector agencies, and they are important for several reasons. In development, humanitarian and advocacy work does not take place in a vacuum; projects and programmes are designed, implemented, and evaluated by men and women who are part of different organisations, each of which has its own systems, values, and culture. Systems, values, and culture are products of the society in which the organisation exists, and the organisation reproduces them in turn.

The battle for changes in policy and practice — which can potentially have greater impact on people's lives than discrete projects — is often played out between organisations and is determined by the relationships between them. This suggests that organisations are more than simply a means of delivering projects; they are also one of the key vehicles for setting the context in which projects and policies evolve and for determining which projects or policies will or will not be supported or delivered. Organisations set the value that is placed upon the impacts that are achieved and determine, at least in part, whether their impacts are, or are not, sustained.

Impact assessment therefore needs to go beyond analysing programmes and projects, and explore the influence and roles of the various organisations

involved. In fact, one can argue that the analysis of projects cannot be separated from analysis of the organisations which run or fund them (Fowler 1995). Impact assessment also requires a broader understanding of various institutions such as the family, market, state, and community in order to assess whether change is also occurring at these levels. This means looking at the effect of interventions or projects on those organisations that embody relations of authority, power, and control. Institutions (including NGOs) are not neutral actors, they are made up of individuals with differing interests. As such, they may well conceptualise and measure impact in ways that will perpetuate those interests. In looking at impact assessment, we cannot ignore this.

This chapter therefore explores the relationship between impact and organisations, examining in particular how the influence of projects and programmes on organisations can be assessed (especially if this was an ultimate aim either through capacity-building or advocacy programmes) and how organisations approach and manage impact assessment.

Assessing change in organisations

This study defines impact as significant change in the lives of people brought about by a given intervention. In this sense, the changes that might be brought about at the level of organisations is not an impact but rather a means to achieve impact. However as many programmes and projects seek to achieve those impacts through changes in organisational policies and practices, it is important to assess whether such change has occurred. This is done in two broad ways: through allying with, and strengthening the capacity of, formal or informal groups (sometimes called partners or counterparts) to bring about change; or through bringing pressure to bear on other organisations through influencing or advocacy work. In either case, for the purposes of impact assessment, this requires a judgement to be made as to what organisational change has occurred, what has brought about that change, and what the broader effects or impacts of that change have been. In this section I summarise a small selection of the growing literature on organisational assessment elements before looking at what some of the case studies actually discovered.

Organisational assessment theory

There are many suggestions, at least for NGOs, of what organisational assessments should or might include (see Uphoff 1987, Drucker 1990, Fowler 1995, Zadek 1996). The list below is a synthesis of some of the common elements these authors propose.

- Identity and values;
- Purpose, vision, and strategy;
- Human and financial resources;
- Systems and procedures;
- Organisational culture;
- Structure and organisation;
- Control and accountability;
- Programmes and services;
- Performance and results;
- Learning and change;
- Leadership, management, and decision-making;
- External linkages and relations.

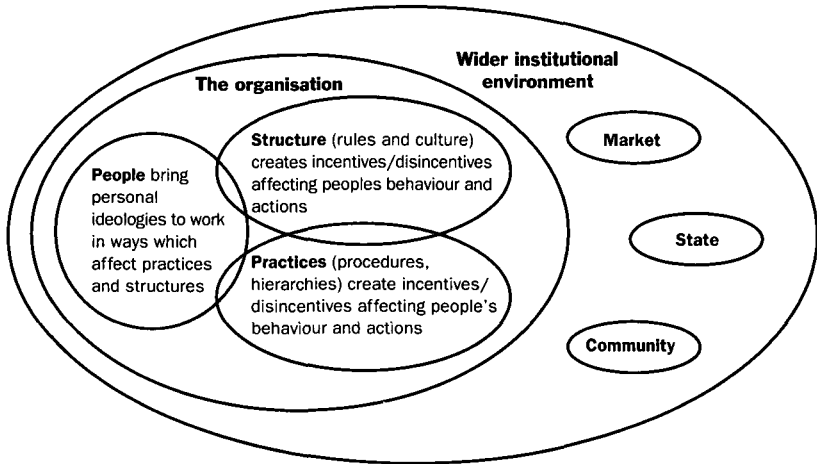
These elements are often related to each other in various models which distinguish between internal processes, external relations, and performance (see Fowler 1995). Deborah Eade in her book on capacity-building suggests five different approaches to organisational assessment: stakeholder analysis, social audit, social relations analysis, appreciative inquiry, and historical analysis (see Eade 1998). In much of the literature it is suggested that an external facilitator can help in providing a 'critical mirror' in these processes (in other words, reflecting back a group's perceptions to them while at the same time introducing questions).

Assessing gender and organisations

Other authors place more stress on the importance of looking at specific interests within organisations such as interests based on gender, class, or ethnicity. Anne Marie Goetz argues that this can be done by starting with the outcomes or products of an organisation and exploring how these affect men and women differently (Goetz 1996). It is then possible to find out the reasons why a particular organisation produced a specific outcome. If, for example, an agricultural extension agency only provides advice to male farmers, this might be because it does not employ many female staff. This finding would lead one to explore why it does not recruit women extension agents, or why it does not undertake research into crops grown by women. This might expose the assumptions this organisation makes about agriculture, and who in the organisation is making those assumptions. This helps to understand how organisations are gendered — in other words, how they function in ways that reflect gender relations and inequalities in society as a whole — and the concept of gendering (organisations will tend to reproduce those inequalities that exist in society). Goetz suggests that 'the key to understanding how such outcomes are produced is to trace the way institutional structures, practices and agents embody and promote gendered interests'. The diagram in Figure 7.1 illustrates how these interact.

Figure 7.1: The links between organisational structures, practices, and agents

Source: adapted from Goetz 1996, p.4



Goetz further argues that although structures and practices in organisations create incentives and disincentives for staff to behave and act in particular ways, those individuals create and recreate the structure and practice. Understanding this link can give important insights not only into how change might be affected in an organisation, but also into how policy directives can be blocked or subverted. This is particularly significant for advocacy strategies, which may need to be adapted to take this into account, or to confront such issues directly. Table 7.1 summarises some of the questions which Goetz suggests for uncovering the 'gendered archaeology' of organisations.

This way of exploring gender in organisations provides an interesting framework for understanding how one set of interests (in this case male interests) is institutionalised and reproduced. Similar analyses could be done for other relevant sets of interests such as class, caste, race, religion, or ethnicity.

This section has indicated that organisational change can be assessed in a variety of ways, and that it is important in the process of impact assessment to understand the role that different organisations might have played. The next section examines how this might be done in practice.

Table 7.1: Towards a gendered archaeology of organisations (after Goetz 1995)

Aspect of the organisation	Line of enquiry
Institutional history	Who was involved in establishing the organisation? Who was not? How was this done?
Ideology	What are the academic disciplines that animate the organisation? What are the underlying assumptions these disciplines make about gender roles?
Participants	Who makes up the organisation? What is the gender division of labour? What is the gender profile of the different levels of the organisation?
Space and time	Are working hours convenient for women employees? Are meetings or social activities held at times which might make women's participation difficult? Is provision made for career breaks, child-care, and so on? Does the organisation demand travel away from home as part of the job?
Authority structures	Can women command authority for their approaches and views in the organisation? Do women have to take on 'male' attributes to be heard? What is valued in terms of achievements in the organisation?
Incentives and accountability	Do performance objectives focus more on quantitative rather than qualitative targets? Do the lines of accountability go upwards, downwards, or are they horizontal?

Organisational self-assessment: the practice

Despite what the literature may say, the tendency in the case studies examined in this book, at least when assessing village-level and community-based organisations, was not to draw up a list of skills or capacities and then assess them, but rather to explore with the groups or organisations in question which elements of organisational development *they* considered important, and how these had changed over time. This was usually done through a process of self-assessment which was facilitated by an external person acting as the 'critical mirror'. Other methods of assessment that were used are outlined in the following.

Gathering information from a range of stakeholder perspectives. This was done especially to explore an organisation's evolution and to explore changes in the nature and scale of collective action and leadership (further discussed in this chapter). It was also a method used to monitor wider changes in the community, for example in community norms and behaviour in terms of gender and self-reliance. Chapter 6 describes how this was done in the CYSD case study.

Attending organisations' meetings. Evaluators can look on as an observer to identify the level and the quality of participation and decision-making, the conduct of leaders, and also the kinds of issues and problems being discussed. This method was used primarily in the Matson Neighbourhood Project, described in the section on direct observation in Chapter 4.

Holding discussions and informal conversations. Talking to committee members and project staff helps to explore, among other things, their ideas for innovation, future plans, and strategies for organisational sustainability. Again, the Matson study in particular used this approach.

The first step in some of the case studies was to identify with the organisation being assessed the key capacities or criteria to be explored. This was usually done simply by asking staff to identify, for example, the ten things that would indicate that an organisation was 'healthy' and the ten things that would signify that an organisation was 'sick', or to identify the key capacities that every organisation needs for it to function properly. Participants then analysed changes in these capacities in a number of ways. The examples below from Wajir and Ghana illustrate how this was done in practice.

In Wajir (see Table 7.2), key capacity-development indicators, as identified by the Wajir volunteer group, were ranked before and after Oxfam had provided training, funding, and assistance. In the re-ranking, zero signifies low capacity, and ten represents high capacity.

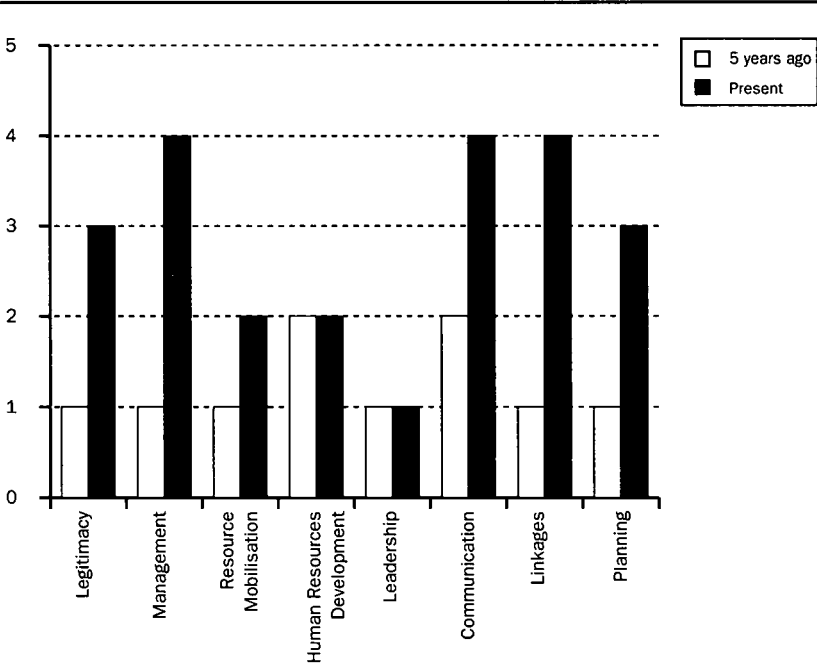
Table 7.2: Changes in key indicators of capacity development at Wajir volunteer group

Indicator	Score (before)	Score (after)	% change
Equipment	0	8	100%
Accounting/ book-keeping	1	8	88%
Networking with donors	1	7	86%
Management skills	1	7	86%
Fund-raising	1	5	80%
Monitoring and evaluation	2	9	78%
Follow up/ assessments	2	9	78%
Proposal development	2	7	71%
Policy advocacy	2	6	67%
Networking with business	2	5	60%
Legitimacy	3	7	57%
Networking with NGOs	5	8	38%
Group participation	5	8	38%
Networking with communities	7	8	13%
Networking with government	7	8	13%
Voluntarism	9	6	-50%

Combining this analysis with other findings, the assessment could infer that Oxfam's assistance had contributed to significant changes in the capacities of local organisations to implement development programmes in pastoral settings. But these changes have not been without costs, as indicated in relation to the declining voluntarism within this group.

In Ghana, a similar exercise was undertaken with a number of organisations. In this case, once the key capacities had been identified, a five-point scale² was agreed against which these capacities could be rate for the past (five years ago) and present. In order to visualise the results and to compare changes across the range of capacities identified, participants were asked to draw a simple bar chart (for an example of one organisation's findings see Figure 7.2).

Figure 7.2: Organisational self-assessment exercise, northern Ghana



Note

- 1 = minimum or little capacity, just starting
- 2 = unsatisfactory, a great deal of improvement required
- 3 = adequate to poor, much improvement required
- 4 = satisfactory, but still some room for improvement
- 5 = very satisfactory, little or no room for improvement

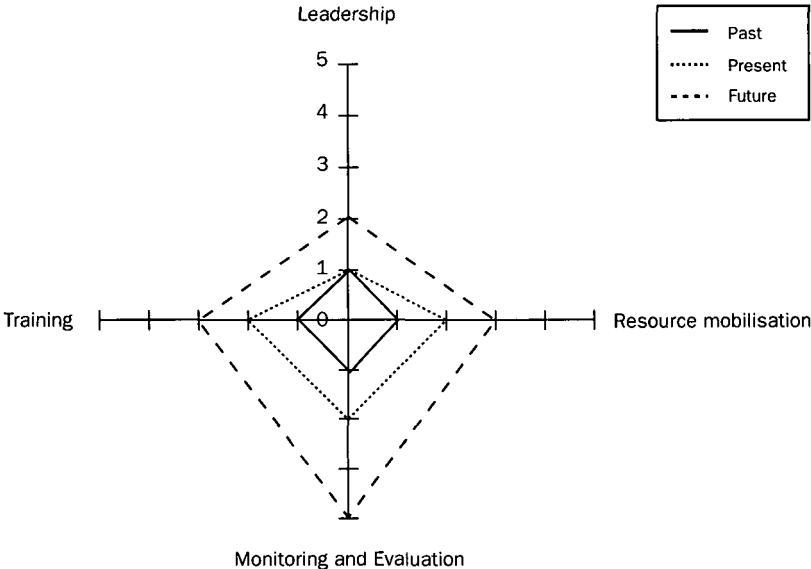
This exercise not only allowed individual organisations to analyse and reflect on their situation, it also allowed members of the Northern Ghana Network for Development (NGND) to compare themselves with others. This revealed some common patterns across the network: resource mobilisation was considered the least developed capacity among all organisations; decision-making, management, and planning had improved dramatically over the past five years as a result of training; and leadership and linkages with other organisations had changed least. This insight into past performance in capacity-building gave an indication of where future efforts might be directed.

Change over time can also be displayed graphically in the form of a spider diagram. In the Ghana study this visualisation technique was used to compare changes in capacity for priority areas identified by the organisation, as well as to set out future targets. Figure 7.3 is an example of a spider diagram drawn by

members of the Galayri Suntaa Women's Group, illustrating their perceived progress in leadership, resource mobilisation, monitoring and evaluation, and training. It also shows what progress they seek to make on these issues in the future.

Agreeing a scale for scoring as described above in the case of Ghana, rather than simply asking people to score from one to ten, as in Wajir, adds a degree of consistency and comparability to the assessment. For example, in some of the Ghana cases, the ranking of key capacities was done individually by different members of the organisation. When large differences in scores occurred this indicated important disagreement between staff about what had been achieved and what room for improvement existed. Because the criteria for the scoring had been agreed beforehand such disagreements could be more fully debated. If this had not been done, comparison would have been more difficult as different scores might simply have indicated different opinions of what a 'low' or 'high' score meant to people. For the purposes of organisational assessment, which usually seeks to explore the past while increasing an organisation's capacity for the future, resolving such differences of opinion is important.

Figure 7.3: Spider diagram of Galayri Suntaa Women's Group, northern Ghana



This sort of participatory diagnosis is important because it leaves the categorisation and classification of organisational elements in the control of members or staff, rather than imposing a prescribed model or a number of general indicators developed elsewhere. The result is therefore more likely to reflect *their* priorities and concerns. And although it may miss out some of the elements that others feel should be included, what is missed out is, in itself, an indication of the stage of self-analysis an organisation has reached. Tracking the dimensions that a self-appraisal process focuses on is therefore an important means of assessing organisational development and change.

Assessing collective action

An analysis of collective action figured strongly in several of the studies (see Chapter 6). Some saw this as a crucial method of assessing the performance of local organisations, as well as of the NGOs which support them. In the Ghana study, a historical analysis of collective action proved a useful means of understanding whether community capacity had changed over time. In addition, it produced more generic indicators for successful and less successful villages and CBOs in promoting collective action (Table 7.3).

Participants were asked to list all kinds of collective action in the community's recent history on cards; sort the cards by source of initiative (local or external); sort them chronologically; analyse a few examples of collective action from each period in depth; compare the time periods and analyse whether community capacity has changed and how, and determine the trends and forces contributing to this; and to draw conclusions.

Again this process is designed to assess past change as well to understand the source of that change. This in turn can help participants to differentiate between blockages to future collective action which they can address, and those for which they may need help and support. When participants went on to look at the reasons for differences in the capacity of different groups to undertake collective action it became clear that many of these related to the nature of the social relations within that community. This underlines that different impacts are likely to occur as a result of the same project because of the unique nature of the communities and organisations involved. It is therefore crucial to understand how the context and the activities of a given project combine to produce change in varying ways, depending on the initial conditions into which a specific action is inserted.

Table 7.3: Indicators of strong, middle, and weak community capacity for collective action (northern Ghana)

Aspects of community	Capacity for collective action		
	Strong	Middle	Weak
Communal spirit	High communal spirit	Factionalism	Low communal spirit
	A sense of common purpose	Chieftancy dispute	Divided community Monopoly of resources held by one group
Leadership	Trust of leaders	Weakened leadership due to out-migration	Few individuals decide for the majority
	Able leadership	Good but declining leadership	Poor leadership Chief's greedy attitude has killed community spirit Selfish leaders Dormant leadership
	Strong leadership		
Ability to undertake collective action	Undertake activities themselves	Difficult to mobilise people	Apathy Inability to undertake collective projects
External links	Good external linkages		Low linkages
Ability to mobilise resources	Good resource mobilisation		Inability to mobilise resources
	Effective fund-raising		
Organisation	Effective record-keeping	Inadequate record-keeping	No regular meetings Poor payment of dues Poor record-keeping Poor communication
	Regular payment of dues		

Assessing leadership

As the Ghana case demonstrates, the issue of leadership — whether in a community or an organisation — emerges as a critical element in achieving change. Other case studies, notably the CYSD and the NK/ GSS studies in Bangladesh, also explore this issue and remark on its importance.

The NK and GSS study goes furthest in developing a framework for assessing leadership. It asks: ‘Common sense suggests that leadership is a critical factor in group dynamics and the development and sustainability of village organisations, but what shape does leadership take?’ (Rao and Hashemi, p.10). Rao and Hashemi have developed five leadership types which they believe cover the spectrum for village organisations in Bangladesh. *Entrenched patrons* describes those leaders who generally have higher status and wealth than group members and who use the group to further their own personal economic or political ends. *Emerging patrons* are those leaders who generally have higher status and wealth than group members. Although they may gain more from group activities than other members, they will normally seek to share at least some of the economic and status gains with them. *Representational leadership* refers to the style of leaders who, although they may have higher status or wealth than the group members, do not seek personal economic gains from their involvement; rather, they are committed to organising group members so that everyone gains collective benefits. *Egalitarian leadership* refers to groups where there is little difference between leaders and members in terms of status and wealth. In these cases, the interests of the leadership and group members are basically the same. *Satellite leadership* refers to leaders who depend on another group for deciding their main course of action: for example, women’s groups are highly dependent on a male group in the same village.

For each of these types Rao and Hashemi explore clashes of interests between leadership and community, the leaders’ autonomy or dependency, the nature of decision-making, and how gains are shared. Table 7.4 outlines these relationships.

These findings suggest a number of key challenges, particularly to intermediary or NGO-support organisations who seek to work with and through community-based organisations. Egalitarian groups in which gains are equitably shared are likely to be, and remain, heavily dependent on external support. Across all groups, economic gains build cohesion, but for groups which engage in riskier activities that challenge entrenched interests, failure can be much more damaging and lead to a backlash that causes a group to disintegrate. In patron-led groups, autonomy is relatively high, although participation is low, because without economic success this model could not sustain itself since patrons need to be able to distribute ‘favours’.

Table 7.4: Leadership typologies of village organisations, NK and GSS, Bangladesh

Dimension of leadership	Leadership type				
	Entrenched patrons	Emerging patrons	Representational leadership	Egalitarian leadership	Satellite leadership
Homogeneity of interests	Great variance in wealth between leaders and members; leaders use village organisation for personal ends.	Significant variance in wealth or status between leaders and members develops over time.	Great variance in wealth, education, or status between leaders and members.	Low variance between leaders and members; all interested in employment and income.	Where variance is significant, leaders shape how the organisation functions.
Autonomy from NGO	High autonomy from NGO in day-to-day affairs; high dependency on NGO on issues that go beyond the village.		Low dependency on the NGO in day-to-day affairs; in some cases, also in planning and implementing collective actions.	High dependency on NGO for economic projects, group management, and wider issues.	Dependency is on another group rather than the NGO.
Decision-making	Leaders make all decisions and are perceived as exploitative.	Leaders make decisions but are perceived as fair.	Leaders persuade members to follow the leaders' decision.	Leaders and members actively participate in decision-making.	Leaders make day-to-day decisions but follow the stronger group on wider issues.
Participation gains	Leaders take all economic resources and gains in political status.	Leaders gain more but share economic resources and gains in status with members.	Gains are shared but leaders control resources.	Gains are equally shared but economic gains are few.	Status gains accrue to leaders; in cases of high homogeneity, economic resources are shared with members.

Lastly, NGO leverage in promoting more 'democratic' or 'egalitarian' behaviour is lowest in those groups which need it most, although it may be greater when it comes to supporting cross-village issues that require intermediation with state actors or foreign donors.

From the point of view of impact assessment it is clear that leadership can make a difference not only to the levels of change that may occur, but also to how the gains (or losses) from given interventions are distributed, and how long they can be maintained. In addition, leaders can determine the nature of the relationship between a community or grassroots organisation and intermediary and international NGOs. This in turn will influence the sustainability of interventions, in particular the transfer of responsibility from NGO to CBO, both of which are critical in achieving impact.

Assessing handover, sustainability, and the relationship between organisations

Transfer of responsibilities and handover

At its simplest level, handover often means simply the transfer of responsibilities for running a project from one organisation to another. In the case studies, an intermediary or international NGO usually handed over responsibility to a community-based organisation. This generally meant identifying the critical functions involved in running a given project, and exploring who undertook these in the past and who is undertaking them now. Below is an example from the Ghana study of an assessment of changes in responsibility between an intermediary NGO and a CBO it supports (see Table 7.5). It includes an assessment of who within the CBO has assumed that responsibility: all the members, or the 'animator' or group facilitator. This assessment was done during an organisational self-assessment exercise by asking participants to identify key responsibilities, and then to score them in terms of who performs more of each task, taking ten as complete responsibility, and zero as none.

Table 7.5 reveals that although there has been a transfer of responsibility from the intermediary NGO to the CBO in certain areas (such as reporting and training), there are other areas such as running meetings, credit disbursement, and monitoring and evaluation where the NGO is doing more than it did in the past. It seems that within the CBO, although the responsibilities of the animator are increasing, this is at the expense of the members whose responsibility is generally declining.

Table 7.5: Transfer of responsibilities chart for two organisations, Ghana

Responsibilities	Intermediary NGO		CBO			
	Management		Animator		Members	
	Past	Present	Past	Present	Past	Present
Reporting	8	6	2	3	0	1
Project planning	2	4	1	1	7	5
Running meetings	0	2	1	3	9	5
Credit disbursement	2	5	1	2	7	3
Loan recovery	1	1	1	6	8	3
Training	9	7	1	2	0	1
Monitoring and evaluation	4	6	2	2	4	2
Resource mobilisation	4	3	1	1	5	6
Average	3.75	4.25	1.25	2.5	5	3.25

This sort of exercise can provide important insights into the relationship between organisations over time. It can provoke debate, in this case about the rather alarming decline in responsibility that seems to have occurred at the level of the CBO membership, and the overall growth in responsibility by the management of the intermediary NGO. This in turn can stimulate discussion about strategies for future handover and associated training needs. In addition, it can allow some assessment of the performance of staff, animators, or community workers who may be specifically engaged in building local capacity and promoting a transfer of responsibility. In the CYSD study, specific assessments by communities of these local ‘cadres’ was seen as an integral component of the impact assessment study. This helped reveal that although

the project is in its phase out stage [it] has not yet adopted any follow up strategy for sustaining these village level cadres. These cadres were functioning well as long as they were provided with incentives. But a strategy for raising these incentives in the future is not yet articulated. In such a condition the sustainability of these cadres... is questionable. (CYSD case study)

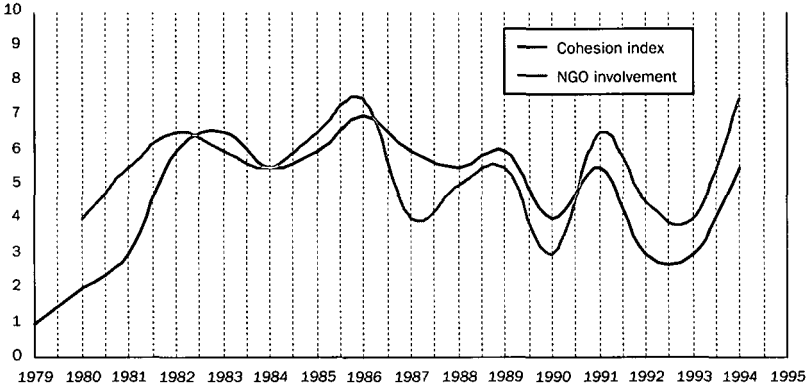
The common response to this problem is to ensure that handover and the transfer of responsibilities is built into the project from the start and continually monitored. One of the ways to do this is to determine a scale of levels for group or organisational development, and a similar scale for the levels of involvement of the support organisation. The NK and GSS study by Rao and Hashemi in Bangladesh did this, although retrospectively. Table 7.6 outlines the criteria used to define levels for both the local group and the support NGO in order to create a composite index.

Table 7.6: Indices of NGO involvement and group cohesion

Rating	Level of NGO involvement	Level of group cohesion
0	No NGO involvement.	No group, or total disintegration of an existing group.
0-1	Intermittent attendance at group meetings, no provision of advice or direction to the group, or no interest in group development.	Group formation: inactive group (meets infrequently, no activities; high level of conflict within group).
1-3	Regular attendance at group meetings, keeping of accounts, conduct of relief distribution.	Normal group activities ongoing; regular meetings; resistance to harassment of individuals; low to medium conflict within group.
4-6	Motivation of potential group members, conscientisation at group meetings; lead role in group discussions; conduct of training for group members; provision of logistical support for group activities.	Group carries out activities at the village level (for instance, arbitration); benefits accrue to few rather than the collective; organised resistance against attacks on the group.
5-8	Development of strategies for social actions; planning economic activities; conflict management and mediation (within and between groups).	Different groups combine together beyond village level for a collective end and collective benefits.
8-9	Decision on and leadership in group social actions; providing legal assistance; political brokering with state mechanisms; providing a national forum for local issues.	Movement launched by local organisations which has a national impact and takes on highest echelons of political power and business interests.
10	No group involvement in decision-making; NGO is completely in control of all decision-making.	Groups of the poor take over political control at the sub-national level (for example, they are involved in framing legislation, and have complete control over resources).

This then enabled the researchers, through discussions with group members, the NGOs, and others to plot graphically the relationship over time between grassroots groups and the support NGOs. The example below is typical of their findings which gave rise to the title of their report 'Institutional Take Off or Snakes and Ladders?', after the children's board game in which players try to progress to the end by climbing 'ladders' but often slip back down the 'snakes' towards the starting point (see Figure 7.4). Their findings showed that group development did not progress smoothly as the intermediary NGO's involvement declined, but that group cohesion and NGO involvement were closely linked and characterised by significant fluctuation between progress and decline.

Figure 7.4: Analysis of relationship between NGO involvement and village cohesion for men's group in Madhyapabantair, Bangladesh



Apart from the study's innovative methodology for exploring the relationships between the organisations, its findings shatter many of the common assumptions about organisational sustainability and the linear nature of group development. They found that group development is punctuated by short-term, issue-specific actions which, if successful, lead to greater cohesion; if unsuccessful, they result in increased inactivity, at least temporarily. The momentum on issues that crossed village boundaries and were more 'political', was maintained not only by the groups but also by the leaders of support NGOs — often because of the backlash and retaliation against groups which confronted more powerful economic or political actors.

Rao and Hashemi argue that the common assumption about group sustainability and handover, in the case of Bangladesh at least, are often highly unlikely and stem from a view of poverty that sees a lack of resources as

its primary cause, rather than inequality and injustice which are built into unequal power relations. The empirical work they did indicates that when local organisations started to tackle the strategic aspects of poverty — addressing power relations beyond the village level — they needed as much support as before, if not more, albeit of a different nature. This suggests that although a project may achieve handover for activities at a community level, if the objective is to change the underlying order that created and perpetuated poverty in the first place, then such an approach to sustainability is at best naïve, and at worst an acceptance of the status quo.

Financial sustainability of organisations

Chapter 4 described ways in which the economic impact and the sustainability of individual projects can be assessed through various kinds of cost-benefit analysis. However, at another level the financial sustainability of organisations themselves may be an issue. Clearly, the nature and purpose of an organisation will determine the degree to which it can or should strive for financial sustainability. Johnson and Rogaly distinguish between three different levels: subsidy-dependent, operational efficiency, and fully self-sufficient (see Johnson and Rogaly 1996).

Level 1: subsidy-dependent. Most if not all of the organisation's costs are funded by donor grants and subsidies and are likely to remain so. The main focus here will probably be assessing the current and future ability of the organisation to raise its own funds efficiently and effectively without compromising its overall objectives and purpose. In some cases it may be appropriate for some aspects of the organisation to start moving towards operational efficiency .

Level 2: operational efficiency. Some or all of the recurrent or running costs of the operation (such as salaries, administrative costs, and so on) are covered by programme revenues such as payment for services, income generation, or interest on loans. Here assessment will mainly examine the degree to which the organisation is covering its costs, how efficiently it is doing this, and whether it can and should do more to move towards the full self-sufficiency or profitability .

Level 3: fully self-sufficient or profitable. The organisation is generating, or plans to generate, a positive return on its assets, even when inflation is taken into account — this includes sufficient revenue to cover recurrent costs and financial costs; in other words, capital is raised though loans not grants and income is sufficient to cover the costs of these loans as well. Here assessment issues are likely to centre on the organisation's longer-term profitability, on whether it can sustain a comparative advantage over its competitors and keep its best future legal status as a not-for-profit organisation, a co-operative, or limited company.

Undertaking these sorts of assessments entails complex analysis of the trade-off between impact, sustainability, and the purpose and values of an organisation. However, some basic financial ratios can be useful in doing this. The first is the ratio between recurrent costs and total costs, which gives an idea of an organisation's financial structure, its potential financial sustainability, and, sometimes, of its efficiency. Recurrent costs are generally defined as those costs that involve maintaining the basic functioning of the organisation (for example, salaries, vehicle running costs, and office costs). For example, the proportion of recurrent costs to total costs of the Oxfam operation in Wajir was 36 per cent, whereas for the local Wajir volunteer group supported and strengthened by Oxfam, the figure was 7.5 per cent. This suggests that although the Oxfam operation may have been valid in terms of start-up costs, particularly in terms of the needs for institution-building, the financial benefits in transferring responsibility to a local organisation over time are high. It may be very difficult for NGOs to determine and agree upon what precisely recurrent costs are, not least because these costs are, rightly or wrongly, often associated with unnecessary bureaucracy or administrative 'overheads'. Organisations which seek to continue to raise money from donors and to cover some of their recurrent or core costs will usually have to give a justification and breakdown of costs.

Another financial ratio is the payment or repayment rate and, related to this, the arrears and default rates. In effect, these are measures of the performance of the income a NGO has earned from payments for its services or, in the case of credit and savings organisations, from the repayment of loans. In essence these rates compare the proportion of repayments actually made with those that are due, judge how late these repayments might be, and estimate what proportion of repayments are never likely to be made. They give a good indication of future sustainability for these kinds of institutions, particularly in terms of the ability to cover recurrent costs (level 2 in the above list). They also give a relatively rapid indication of problems that may affect future sustainability if they are not resolved quickly. For example, if an organisation has a very high arrears or default rate which is greater than the provision it has made for losses of this type, then it cannot continue to sustain loans if it wants to survive.

Lastly there are two ratios which provide an overall organisational picture and can allow comparison between organisations. One of these is the sustainability index (Havers 1996), which looks at the percentage of total costs covered by revenue during a given period.

$$\text{Sustainability index} = \frac{\text{total income during the period}}{\text{total costs incurred during the period}} \times 100$$

For credit schemes, the break-even interest rate defines the interest rate that the scheme would have to charge its borrowers if it was to be self-sufficient.

This can then be compared to other schemes and official rates in order to assess the degree of subsidy required and the scheme's future viability. For both of these ratios, estimates of future liabilities, interest, and inflation rates are needed for costs to be calculated properly. Organisations which aspire to self-sufficiency will find this rate essential, given that future revenue may need to be discounted in line with inflation and future costs increased in line with inflation and interest rates. This information is necessary in order to get an accurate and realistic picture of future financial sustainability.³

Assessing funding relationships

An organisation's funding relationships will usually be critical in determining, at least in part, not just how it reports but also how it plans, implements, and evaluates its work; they will affect who is recruited and retained; how it relates to others — including its own staff and ultimate beneficiaries — and ultimately, how it grows and survives. The behaviour of donors may therefore be a significant determinant of the impact that the organisation in receipt of their funding achieves.

Recent studies on this issue (Moore and Stewart 1998, INTRAC 1998) underline the fact that being a 'good' donor requires a lot more than doling out cheques: it includes having good local knowledge, the capacity to assess organisations as well as projects, and sensitivity to the impact one's funds and corresponding demands can have on local organisations. Moore and Stewart, in a study of Nepal and Zimbabwe, distinguish between three models of funding.

Arm's length. This is funding at a distance, often from outside the country, for large projects well established organisations.

Handshake. This kind of funding — often from Northern NGOs with Southern-country offices — works through more frequent contact and exchange, including the provision of small grants and accompaniment; it may also include organisational funding, rather than project funding.

Hand-in-hand. The donor and the local organisation work jointly on a particular project or in a specific region, with regular contact.

Moreover, these relationships are characterised by varying demands for reporting or specific formats for funding submissions, which will also be determined by the attitude of donors. Rick Davies has developed a continuum of attitudes, characterised below, and suggests that more thought and effort needs to go into how donors solicit information. For example, they might specifically try to obtain beneficiary-centred information, which in turn may lead to the funded NGOs having 'to enter into contracts or understandings with their own beneficiaries ... [t]his itself may be empowering for those beneficiaries' (Davies 1997).

Laissez-faire attitude towards receiving information. Funded NGOs should be trusted to do as they say, and not harassed by donors.

Minimalist (defensive) attitude. Donor information demands can distract and undermine the effectiveness of NGOs in their work and should therefore be minimised.

Minimalist (self-interested) attitude. Donors are overwhelmed with the practical tasks associated with funding (identification, appraisal, approval, disbursement, and documentation) and do not have sufficient time to read and make use of information about project activities and impact. As a result, they do not bother asking for much more than what they already receive.

Apologetic/ realist attitude. Donors have obligations to their own donors and thus must ask for information from the NGOs they fund, although they feel or know that this can be a burden on the funded NGO.

Facilitator attitude. Information is needed from funded NGOs so that other NGOs can learn from their experiences. A related rationale is the need to support development education in the donor's own country.

Interventionist attitude. The process of requesting information can have a positive impact on NGOs' institutional development (defined, as above, in terms of increased responsiveness).

Hard-line attitude. Funded NGOs have signed a contract and therefore have an obligation to supply information.

Although the case studies did not systematically examine the nature of relationships between the organisations involved and their donors, some cases made it clear that donor pressures, for example to spend money on agricultural technology by a certain date in the CYSD study, led to less impact being achieved. Indeed, in some cases the continued financial relationship between Oxfam GB or Novib and those undertaking the case studies influenced the case studies themselves, in terms of which programmes were chosen for assessment (ENDA), as well as in terms of management tensions during the process (Ghana).

For the purpose of impact assessment it is important to recognise that the relationship between donors and NGOs can have an important effect on many aspects of organisational development, not least the psychological health⁴ and feelings of dependence local staff. Knock-on effects in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, and impact must be assessed. This demands a more mutual assessment of this relationship, rather than treating the local organisation as if it was isolated from the demands placed upon it. Donors have to understand that this relationship is more than simply an input to be charted in a log-frame.

One of the future challenges for impact assessment work will be to help determine the role of NGOs in broader processes of transformation — in relation to the strengthening of civil society, the creation and maintenance of social capital, and the role of civil-society organisations in promoting good governance. Although there are some attempts to do this, such as Kees Biekart's work on *European Private Aid Agencies and Democratic Transition in Central America* (see especially pp.125-131), much remains to be done to link this kind of analysis to assessments of change in the lives of ordinary women, men, and children. This is vital if NGO strategies are to be tested against whether they really make a difference.

How organisations approach and manage impact assessment

Choices are made at different levels in organisations — choices about where to work, who to work with, how to allocate scarce resources, and what focus to choose for individual programmes. Implicitly or explicitly, criteria are used to make these choices. Impact is perhaps the most elusive one, especially when broad choices are being made, and yet it is one of the most important.

Although perhaps the emphasis on impact assessment is relatively new, most development organisations have invested in some kind of monitoring and evaluation processes. Summary 7.1 outlines some of the classic problems associated with these.

Summary 7.1: Classic problems and failures of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems

Information produced for M&E systems is irrelevant, late, or in a form that is not usable, and M&E systems are not integrated into project management.

Evaluation/ impact systems are seen as a threat to jobs rather than as a learning experience.

The over-ambitious design of M&E systems leads to too much data with poor understanding of the consequences of managing and analysing it; there is little emphasis on minimum or light systems.

Evaluation is often at the expense of monitoring because focus on local staff or beneficiaries is often secondary to donor or organisational needs.

Poor marginal groups, particularly women, are often ignored in M&E processes, and results are not cross-checked with them or fed back to them.

Poor quality of data because of various methodological problems:

- the approach used lacks or is based on weak baseline data, objectives, and indicators;
- the approach used fails to recognise that proving statistical significance of data often requires an inordinate amount of time and cost – this investment requires a conviction that it is better to be 'long and legitimate' than 'short and dirty';
- the approach used over-emphasises large surveys which require the measurement of complex input-output indicators, rather than using proxies and 'subjective' indicators which may be considered soft or biased;
- the approach used attempts to prove cause-effect relationships which are at best uncertain, based on linear notions of development.

Systems designed for learning tend to be slow to learn and adapt themselves.

Organisations and individuals are very clever at fending off the conclusions they do not like with a variety of tactics.

After Coleman (1992) and Pettigrew (1974)

Several of the case studies encountered some of the same difficulties and are attempting to redesign their planning and monitoring and evaluation systems as a result. Some of the common elements and challenges that emerge from this are described under the following headings. These include questions about which approach to adopt, who to ask for information, how to synthesise and communicate information, and how to encourage learning and create incentives for changing policy and practices as a result of that learning?

Methodological pluralism

Any organisational system has to recognise that no one method or approach will be adequate in undertaking impact assessment, and that any system must be adapted to the particular needs of the organisation in question, and must also be flexible enough to accommodate the organisation's variety of programmes and projects.

[T]here is no 'optimal' approach but ... better practice is about 'achieving fit' in meeting specific objectives of the impact assessment at an acceptable level of rigour, that is compatible with the program's context, that is feasible in terms of costs, timing and human resource availability. (Hulme, quoted in Johnson 1998)

Multiple sources

The incentives offered by an organisation's various stakeholders contribute to determining its performance and impact. Analysing to whom the organisation is accountable, and how multiple accountability is managed, is equally important. Any organisational system therefore has to consciously seek out the views of a wide variety of stakeholders and cross-check their opinions. It needs to be clear about whose views count in case of differences of opinion.

Two tools developed by the New Economics Foundation in collaboration with three NGOs seem particularly appropriate as a framework for analysing and pulling together data on this issue: they are the organisation-ranking grid and the social audit. The first lays out various stakeholders' assessments of an organisation in order to establish the degree of coherence between them. This approach suggests that effectiveness, of NGOs at least, rises with the level of coherence. Social auditing takes this a step further. It seeks to make public, in the same way as company accounts, the assessments of a range of groups regarding the social and ethical behaviour of the organisation (Zadek 1996). As the case studies in this book demonstrate, the voices of some stakeholders rarely get heard, and the impact of programmes and policies upon some groups is often ignored. These are usually the groups who had no say in programme design in the first place and whose views, values, and needs are not taken into account in the monitoring of policy and project implementation.⁵

Aggregation and information-sharing

Some of the organisations in the case studies mention that their previous M&E systems were 'too slow' or took 'too long', with all staff getting the same information whether they needed it or not. Some also note that field and middle-level staff did not feel a sense of ownership of the process, or of the outputs, of monitoring systems which were mainly designed for the needs of others. However, several of the studies highlight the importance of impact tracking or monitoring. If even part of the data collected by monitoring systems is not relevant and useful to those collecting it, then the quality of that data is likely to suffer in quality. When this happens, aggregated data can give a very false sense of confidence that what is reported as occurring is actually happening.

But just as not all information is needed by everyone in an organisation, not all analysis has to be undertaken at the same level. Indeed, the idea of 'meta-evaluations' which pull together learning across several evaluations or case studies is becoming increasingly used by many agencies in order to draw out generic lessons across a range of contexts and activities.

[I]t is extremely difficult to compare the results of participatory poverty assessments across locations, particularly at the regional and national level...

BRAC works all over Bangladesh. Although its beneficiaries are almost homogeneous in terms of their economic status, their needs are heterogeneous and therefore so are their perceptions of poverty as they live in different socio-cultural rural settings. (BRAC case study)

In order to overcome this obstacle, some agencies are seeking to adopt a ranking system for comparing the performance of different programmes as assessed by local managers. While this has the value of simplicity it contains a number of risks: in the absence of agreed quality criteria, or cross-checking in other ways, the ranking may simply represent an individual's views. The quantification of performance that this will allow may lead to simplistic comparisons which are invalid if taken in isolation; if linked to resource allocation this will result in greater manipulation of results in order to secure future resources.

In the end, different stakeholders will have different information needs. A large organisation should consider how individual project appraisal or monitoring, which is vital for beneficiaries and project staff, can still be sampled by other stakeholders. Managers or trustees may need proportionately more cross-programme or thematic analysis which is related to broader strategic aims. However, no matter how carefully designed reporting and information-management systems are, they can never replace face-to-face encounters and dialogue. These are essential for overcoming hierarchy in organisations and complementing other forms of reporting and reviewing progress.

Learning, culture, and attitude

The ultimate purpose of impact assessment is to learn about what works and what does not, and how to apply these lessons in the future. There are a number of well-known bottlenecks to promoting organisational learning, some of which were apparent in the case studies. These include high staff-turnover, poor systems for recording storing and retrieving information, and poor linkages between learning and training. This is compounded by lack of rewards or incentives to learn and share learning; as a result, little time is devoted to it. When learning is hived off to specialist units, staff may see it as the specialists' responsibility, rather than everyone's. Lastly, NGOs are not seen as particularly adept at dealing with the kinds of discordant information that learning processes are liable to reveal (Roche 1995 and 1996, Edwards 1996).

Summary 7.2 suggests some of the questions that can be explored in order to assess the degree to which the organisational context within which impact assessment occurs will be conducive to absorbing its lessons.

Summary 7.2: Questions related to organisational learning⁶

Who learns in the organisation and how?

What kind of learning is rewarded?

To what degree are errors admitted and analysed?

What forms of knowledge are defined as legitimate, and how?

What constraints are there to learning?

How does information flow in the organisation?

How is institutional memory constructed; how accessible is it, and for whom?

What changes occur through self-learning, rather than other ways of learning?

How does the organisation react to learning which challenges its assumptions?

Is the organisation better placed than it was, in the light of what it has learned, to anticipate change in its environment and adapt accordingly?

What changes are being made to the organisation's learning systems?

From the case studies some clear messages emerge about the elements of organisational culture that are likely to underpin a learning organisation. The Pakistan study recommends to 'start a recording habit, be curious and cross-check, be honest'. The CYSD study notes how critical individual attitudes and behaviour are; they emphasise that one should not approach people with prejudice or pre-conceived ideas, but rather be open and curious, as the researcher in this example.

[T]he researcher walked directly with a friendly smile into the field and acted as an outsider who is interested to know about his cultivation. This pleased the farmer and he was glad to delineate his experience since the intervention of the project. (CYSD case study)

The same study reminds us that perseverance counts: 'the reward of good work can only be delayed, but can never go to waste'. Finally, becoming and remaining externally focused is vital. What happens at the interface of an

organisation in its relationships with the outside world and its primary stakeholders, and how these shift over time, gives an interesting insight not only into how open an organisation is to its stakeholders but also into how well it adapts in the light of that learning.

Towards some solutions and good practice

Creating demand, incentives, and accountability

Good recording and reporting, curiosity, cross-checking, honesty, openness, perseverance, and an external focus are behaviours which will not be practised unless they are rewarded. Learning, reflection, and sharing of knowledge will not happen if they are not valued. In several of the case studies, comments were made about the time and effort that the impact assessment work required, and how the absence of co-researchers, lack of time, and staff turnover or transfer made the work especially difficult and sometimes stressful. If impact assessment work and subsequent improvements in quality are to take place then resources must be made available and such work must be seen as an integral part of everyone's work, not an 'add-on' or a luxury.

This also means creating demands and incentives for impact assessment to become a central element of development work, and articulating these demands through the organisation's structure and policies. The following example on the lack of gender-disaggregated data reported by project staff concludes that

[o]verall the problem is not so much the lack of gender awareness by field staff and researchers, but the lack of sufficient perceived demand by higher levels within agencies like Action Aid for gender differentiated results. If this demand had been in place it could have acted as a counter influence to the pressures felt by staff to aggregate and summarise research results from multiple meetings in multiple villages. (Goyder et al., p.49)

This study suggests some criteria for assessing the degree of participation in impact assessments (which in turn could be used to encourage particular ways of going about it) such as the extent of differentiation between different groups — particularly, but not only, between men and women; the frequency at which views are obtained from various groups; the degree to which new indicators, rather than predetermined ones, are allowed to emerge; and the extent to which information provided actually produces change in practices or policies.

In addition to creating incentives for those 'below' from 'above', a key issue is how to establish the accountability of those in positions of institutional power to those whom their organisations exist to serve. Impact assessment is one of the ways of doing this, along with processes such as stakeholder reviews or social audits where the results are actually made public. In assessing the accountability of senior staff or managers some key questions might include the following.

- What proportion of time do senior managers spend with programme staff or those who have contact with other organisations?
- What proportion of time and money is devoted to meetings and skill upgrading of programme staff?
- To what extent are senior managers open to continuous quality control by the organisation's counterparts and other stakeholders?
- How much insistence is there on the development of flexible, bottom-up quality-control measures?
- To what degree are the findings of such bottom-up processes made available both within and outside the organisation?
- To what extent do senior management support innovation through encouraging the analysis of past failures?
- To what degree is the organisation (its board, trustees, general assembly, staff and so on) representative of, or able to represent, those whom it seeks to serve?

Good practice in impact assessment systems

So what might good practice for impact assessment be? As is the case for monitoring and evaluation systems in general, there is a danger in supposing that impact assessment is going to solve more than it can reasonably be expected to. Moreover, impact assessment is linked to other important elements of organisational development such as learning, accountability, and reward systems. However, there seems to be a growing consensus about at least some of the elements that are needed for organisational impact assessment systems to function well. These emerge not only from the case studies presented in this book but also from other recent studies (Goyder et al. 1998, Oakley et al. 1998) and I outline their general conclusions in the following.

Keep impact assessment simple and user-friendly. Build on what people know and are able to do, and make sure that they understand, use, and benefit from the system. Keep the system simple, flexible, and focused on a few key

topics, but allow a variety of means of assessing them. Make the findings visible and accessible: it shouldn't require reading pages and pages of text or figures to see what is happening. The system should allow one to discover quickly whether progress towards overall goals has been made or at least whether there has been deviation.

Embed impact assessment in all phases of the project-cycle. Do the basics well by ensuring that impact assessment is embedded in all phases of the project cycle. It is hard to carry out impact assessment without relevant baseline data, objectives, and indicators, although retrospective techniques can overcome some of the problems associated with a lack of this information. Make sure that there are clear mechanisms for ensuring that feedback is incorporated into new phases of programming or organisational development.

Focus on the key questions. Has there been change over time? How significant was it, and for whom? Was it good or bad, intended or not? How does this change compare with other periods, with other groups, and with the costs involved? What caused the change, in terms of the project and its context?

Recognise diversity and cross-check. The information that is collected should always be disaggregated so that different groups views and conditions are taken into account, especially those of men and women. Records and reports need to recognise that different people in an organisation have different needs and, if possible, tailor reports to those needs. There should be more than one channel for monitoring information in order to ensure that the system contains checks and balances to double-check information.

Ensure that the system evolves, too. It should be the responsibility of one person or group to make sure that the monitoring system itself evolves and adapts over time, selecting and learning from useful variations of existing tools and methods. It is often better to see how efficient existing sources of information can be used better, rather than to adopt completely new systems, which are likely to be costly, time-consuming, and often not comparable with old ones.

Ensure organisational coherence. Organisational incentives, rewards accountability, and other systems must be compatible with the impact assessment system at the very least; ideally, they should promote and encourage its functioning. This requires a commitment from senior managers to ensure coherence with other systems; to keep the organisation's work focused on its programme and the external environment; and to provide an accountability framework in which 'bottom-up' quality-control measures are properly represented along with those of other stakeholder interests.

The impact of impact assessment

Although all of the impact studies demanded a lot of time and effort, the agencies involved generally seem to think that this was justifiable, because in many cases it allowed the ultimate beneficiaries of the programme to have their say, and also improved the beneficiaries' overall perception and understanding of the intervening agencies. In this sense the impact studies increased mutual accountability to some degree.

The studies also provided critical information about certain policy implications, notably the tendency of several programmes to benefit the relatively 'less poor' and, inadvertently, to exclude the poorest. They pointed out the importance of dynamics within households and communities — particularly relating to gender, class, kinship or ethnicity, and the nature of leadership — in determining whether inputs and outputs were translated into wider, sustained impacts and who benefited and who lost. Impact assessment shed light on the significance of community self-confidence and pride in creating a positive 'feedback loop', starting with what the community has achieved which in turn motivates people to continue; however, the negative 'feedback loop' was also apparent.

The studies highlighted the vital role played by intermediaries or 'outsiders' in supporting communities or membership organisations when they seek to influence institutions and wider power relations; and the role played by both community-level organisations and intermediaries in integrating and harmonising the actions of several actors and sometimes facilitating the dialogue and co-ordination between them.

Apart from leading to a growing recognition of the importance of impact assessment, the studies underlined some of the current weaknesses and challenges which agencies face: the absence of adequate baseline or monitoring data that allow change over time to be properly estimated; the difficulty of quantifying, aggregating, and reporting on much of the impact they achieve; the absence of a coherent or adequate overall planning, appraisal, monitoring and evaluation framework within which impact assessment would be integrated; the difficulties of proving attribution and the need to assess how various actors combine to produce positive impact; and the question of finding a reasonable balance between undertaking systematic assessment of impact — which is adequately resourced — and continued programme work

In the end, 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating' and to this extent the results are encouraging. BRAC, in response to the results of its study which indicated a recent bias in member selection towards the relatively 'less poor', has

initiated steps to enter the hard-core poor. Over 200,000 women have been already identified. A survey is being conducted to assess their problems and need to evolve a suitable programme of intervention for this bypassed group.

CORDES will attempt to institutionalise the assessment method it piloted during this case study and use it as a critical adjunct to their planning process in order to adapt their strategic direction in the light of its findings.

As a result of the organisational learning generated from their impact assessment, Proshika have initiated an organisation-wide strategy for developing a more coherent approach to all its work — not just impact assessment — based on much more participatory methods and ways of working.

The Northern Ghana Development Network now wants to develop a research and advocacy strategy, focusing on issues the study identified as critical, such as health financing and food security. They recognise that their members will need to gain a better understanding of both local and national policy issues.

Conclusion

Understanding the influence, roles, and relationships of the range of organisations and institutions involved in a given programme or region is a critical part of assessing impact; it is also important in developing stronger mutual accountability in partnership arrangements. This means overcoming a number of methodological and institutional challenges in terms of synthesising and sharing multiple perspectives and stimulating learning. In the first instance this requires a desire on the part of each agency, including donors, to undertake systematic self-assessment of its performance and relationships. This makes mutual assessments more feasible — but if they are to be truly mutual, communities must be encouraged to assess the intermediary organisations which support them, and intermediary organisations encouraged to look critically at their funders. This is not always going to be straightforward, given the unequal power relationship between them. However, it needs all actors in the process to collaborate in seeking to understand how, together, they are maximising their impact.

Conclusion

In the introduction to this book, I described a vicious circle in which many NGOs are trapped. Before returning to look at what the findings of this book suggest about these wider issues, and the creation of a more virtuous circle, I explore some of the more specific issues that the case studies set out to address, notably:

- the key elements of impact assessment;
- how impact assessment can deal with issues relating to the unequal power and participation of the range of stakeholders involved;
- what has been learned about various approaches to undertaking impact assessment;
- what the implications of the findings are in relation to the organisational context in which impact assessment takes place.

The essence of impact assessment

As we have seen, it is the constant and fluctuating interaction between a given set of actions (in this case, a project or programme) and the context in which these are situated, that produces change. If impact assessment is essentially about looking at change, it may be useful to review the various ways in which the studies did this. In practice, they focused on a number of very simple questions: Has there been change in people's lives — yes or no? In what areas has there been change: in health, income, happiness? Has the change been positive or negative? How much change has there been, in a relative sense (for example, income has doubled compared to last year) or in an absolute sense (for example, income has shrunk by \$5 a month)? What brought about that change?

However, *comparing* these changes with other factors was critical in the studies for the purposes of impact assessment. The research findings were compared to the following elements:

- other groups (for instance, men and women, 'rich' and 'poor', control groups, non-project respondents, and so on);

- other changes (for example, improvements in health compared with improvements in education);
- baseline information (ranging from the simple, such as last year's data, to longer time-series or longitudinal data);
- the costs invested;
- changes in the context (for example, even if people became worse off because of general trends, did the intervention contribute to those it supported being less worse off than they would otherwise have been?).

Quantification of change

In those instances where this kind of comparison was not, or could not, be made, researchers may have felt that they needed data on absolute change rather than relative change, when in fact information on relative change would have been sufficient. For example, in the Wajir study the differences in the relative perceptions of respondents within and outside the project area regarding changes over time in quality of life, water reliability, and security allowed important conclusions to be drawn. However, if the study had felt it necessary to gather absolute figures regarding, for example, water reliability or income this would have probably required resources beyond the budget and time-scale of the study. A focus on absolute figures can also lead to excluding the views and perceptions of those who may not be able to put numbers to changes in their lives, but who can quite clearly prioritise and rank different changes and their importance.

There were also cases where a greater quantification of change was necessary and possible, but was seemingly avoided. In more than one study, participatory exercises at the community level showed clearly that there had been a positive change in people's lives, but they gave no indication whether this referred to two people or 2,000, to men or women, to 'rich' or 'poor'. Again relatively simple questions and exercises, such as ranking or scoring, could have helped in understanding not just what had changed, but its scale and significance. This is important, because as we have seen the difference between impact assessment and other types of assessment or evaluation is precisely that it explores significant or long-lasting change brought about by a given project or programme.

In the end deciding how significant or long-lasting a change is, and how attributable it is to a given action, is a matter of judgement. The decision depends particularly on the context and, of course, who decides what is significant, and means recognising that change is the outcome of multiple and complex processes as well as of the struggles, ideas, and actions of various and unequal interest groups. This is different from seeing development as a

managed process undertaken by development agencies and NGOs through projects and programmes. Simple models of cause and effect, linking project inputs to outputs and impact, will usually be inadequate for assessing the impact of what NGOs do; we need models which embrace the wider context of influences and change processes that surrounds projects and programmes, and the wide variety of the resulting impact.

The contingent and uncertain nature of change as well as the possibility of discontinuous or catastrophic change puts a premium on impact monitoring, learning, and adaptation. What is certain is that the unexpected will happen, and that we cannot plan for every eventuality; any action we take might produce dramatic and significant change that was not predicted. This puts the onus on those who intervene in processes of change to monitor the impact of what they do, on a regular basis, and adapt their actions as a result. Is it simply not good enough to say that impact cannot be measured until after a project has finished, when significant — and negative — change can occur very early on in the lifetime of a project or programme. Impact assessment must be able to cope with turbulent, non-linear change as well as gradual and linear change (Roche 1994).

The issue of power and participation

If impact is defined as significant or long-lasting change, the key questions concern not only what has changed, whether it is significant, and to what degree it can be attributed to a given set of actions, but equally who makes the judgement.

Despite the efforts made in the case studies, in many situations certain groups, notably women and children, are consistently excluded from 'participatory' exercises. In some emergency situations there may also be logistical and political limits to participation. The case studies also reveal that even among the group of participating NGOs there are several interpretations of the term 'participation', as well as different criteria for assessing its quality or depth. Given the growing importance that is being attached to participation, not just by NGOs but also by bilateral and multilateral agencies, the absence of clearer agreements and standards for assessing the quality of participation is particularly problematic.

While the scientific tradition sets out clear criteria for judging the quality of research, based on notions of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity, there is no such broad agreement as yet on criteria for assessing the quality of participatory research. Some attempts to develop a model have been made, for example by Jules Pretty and others, building on the work of Guba and Lincoln. Pretty has adapted the criteria used to assess the quality of conventional research in order to find equivalent ones for participatory

processes of inquiry. These are based on based on the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Pretty 1994, Guba and Lincoln 1989). Table 8.1 summarises these criteria as well as those commonly used in scientific research.

Table 8.1: Criteria for judging the trustworthiness of information

Conventional scientific criteria	Participatory criteria
Internal validity: the proof of causal relationships (A leads to B).	Length and depth of engagement of actors: discovering what has changed and why, based on sufficient trust and rapport to gain quality information.
External validity: the degree to which findings can be applied to other contexts or groups.	Persistent and parallel observation: identifying and focusing on key issues; using a number of observers at one time.
Reliability: the degree to which the findings could be repeated if the enquiry was replicated in the same or a similar situation.	Cross-checking: combining various sources, methods, and investigators, as well as participant checking.
Objectivity: the extent to which multiple observers can agree on a phenomenon, ensuring that the results are not due to the researcher's biases.	Expression of difference and negative case analysis: searching out different views and explanations from a range of stakeholders, particularly on the basis of gender and class; analysing change for the worse.
	Research diary and peer review: making transparent the means by which the information was collected as well its sources (so that an audit of the inquiry would be possible).
	Impact on stakeholders' capacities to know and act: the process of inquiry should be empowering in and of itself and generate new insights for all concerned.

The important difference between the two approaches is the degree to which the researcher or observer is considered capable of remaining independent of what is observed or measured. In the scientific method this is deemed essential, and therefore a lot of effort goes into designing measurement tools, experiments, and methods of analysis which attempt to ensure this. Participatory and qualitative research accepts that researchers or observers are necessarily part of what they observe, and that their own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours will determine, at least in part, the information gathered. It therefore emphasises the quality and depth of engagement, as well as cross-checking findings from several perspectives.

These differences are often couched in terms of an opposition of objectivity and subjectivity, when in fact the issue may be more usefully debated in terms of how one can avoid bias in any given method of assessment. If we pose the question in this way we can ask whether the prolonged process of participant observation adopted in the Matson study may have been biased towards the views of particular groups within the community. We can ask whether the household survey undertaken in the BRAC study reduced bias by ensuring that a representative sample of village organisations was selected for study. In other words, the context of the study and the kind of activity being assessed will determine the approach adopted and the mix of methods and tools employed. The tools and methods within that mix will be subject to different criteria or standards: a questionnaire survey which seeks quantitative information from a representative sample of a given population would have different quality criteria than a series of focus-group discussions exploring how changing attitudes to gender relations have been brought about. However, the findings of the study as a whole and the individual methods adopted should be judged according to the degree to which the views and perceptions of staff, external assessors, as well as different groups of local people and other stakeholders, were, or were not, taken into account and cross-checked with each other.

The different approaches to impact assessment

The project in question, its context, and issues of power and participation determined what was assessed in the case studies, as well as how. Three main approaches were adopted. The first was mainly focused on an individual project and involved clarifying and specifying project objectives and indicators and then assessing the degree to which they had been met. In some cases, this involved a careful analysis of the links between outputs, outcomes, and impacts with a limited number of indicators being verified at a each level of the impact chain. In some studies, control group or individuals outside the project areas were compared with those in project areas.

The second approach focused on the projects being assessed, but looked more broadly at the potential changes that might have occurred as a result. A range of stakeholders were asked to identify the most important changes brought about by a given project, and how they happened. In some cases, this involved using a broad checklist of potential areas or dimensions of change.

The case studies in the third category were interested first and foremost in the overall changes in people's lives and sought to explore with them the significance of these changes and their causes, including the project in question. This approach seeks to situate changes brought about by a particular project within the context of other changes.

Change, objectives, and indicators

Most case studies examined change at an individual or household level, although some, particularly those which included advocacy, explored wider changes at the level of the community, the organisation, and in policy. However, certain areas or dimensions of change are seen as significant in all the case studies:

- income, expenditure, and assets, including access to land and credit;
- health, education, literacy, and other skills and knowledge;
- infrastructure, including access to water and sanitation facilities in particular;
- food security and production;
- social relations, social capital, unity, and changed community norms;
- women's ownership and control of assets, mobility, access to income-generation activities, child-care, freedom to express their views, power in household decision-making, ability to control violence; and the household division of labour;
- peace and security, law and order, declining levels of sexual violence, human-rights abuses, and destruction of lives and property;
- ability to cope with crises;
- self-confidence, self-esteem, independence, potential and capacity to make claims and demands;
- overall quality of life.

Although the indicators people choose for identifying significant change in their lives may be different, the above list perhaps represents a common core

of dimensions that are important to people which is not location-specific. But the priorities and order that various groups — men and women, old and young, rich and poor — assign to those changes will vary both within and between regions or locations, and over time. In addition, as the Pakistan study suggests, the aesthetic, cultural, religious, or spiritual dimensions of people's lives are affected both positively and negatively by projects and programmes, yet tend to be ignored. This may mean that, for impact assessment purposes, the search for common or generic indicators is perhaps much less vital than understanding which areas of change certain groups of people prioritise, and how these relate to each other in different contexts. In this sense, indicators become more a means of exemplifying why and how change within a particular area has occurred, rather than simply a means to verify a project's progress against predetermined objectives.

Tools and methods

A wide variety of tool and methods were used in the studies; these were explored in some detail in Chapter 4. Perhaps the most important conclusion is that the selection of a judicious mix, and sequence, of tools and methods is heavily dependent on being clear about the purpose and focus of the assessment, and designing it in a way that is appropriate to the context, the project in question, and the organisations involved. The ability to develop appropriate method combinations and sequences, and the ability to adapt and innovate as the study progresses, seem to be as important as the knowledge and skill required for individual methods.

A number of key findings relate to the families of methods explored. First, it is evident that full use must be made of existing data — whether it has been collected as part of the project or is available from other sources. The production of synoptic documents that pulled together many years' worth of project reports and files proved especially useful in some cases. In addition, local government sources, education and health records, data from agricultural research stations, also proved an important source of information where the context was explored, despite many limitations.

Even where existing information was of high quality, and a great effort had been put into compiling baseline data, nearly all the case studies had to reconstruct at least part of the history of not only the projects, but also of the wider changes in the lives of individuals and communities. This applies particularly to situations where project plans and documents are weak or non-existent, as in emergency situations where rapid changes in the context may have led to changing priorities which may not always have been documented. Chapter 4 detailed many ways in which researchers managed to reconstruct information.

Although large-scale household surveys suffer many limitations, and have received quite a bad press in recent years, the case studies indicate that they can serve a useful function if they are focused, pre-tested and adapted, if enumerators receive adequate training and preparation, if findings are properly cross-checked and sequenced with other more qualitative data, and if there is adequate capacity to analyse the results. Mini-surveys and the kind of questionnaire used in the Wajir study which combined participatory tools and standard questions offer useful alternatives to fully-fledged surveys.

The wide range of interview, workshop, and focus-group methods adopted in the case studies threw up some critical questions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of individual versus group processes — issues that are rarely addressed in many of the manuals on participatory research or study design. Yet the case studies showed examples of individuals answering the same questions differently in group or individual settings; individuals disagreeing in private with conclusions reached in a group setting; particular groups (for instance, women, young people, and members of the least well-off households) being consistently excluded from, or ignored, during group exercises. On the other hand, there were also examples of group exercises generating new insights for participants, sometimes as a result of sharing sensitive information (for example, on domestic violence); strengthening a feeling of solidarity and common purpose; and bringing together previously marginal voices in a way that allowed them to be heard.

Direct and participant observation also often does not receive much attention as a method in monitoring and evaluation texts. Yet in a number of the studies the advantage of 'resident researchers' and people simply 'hanging around' and keeping their eyes open is quite evident. In particular, observation of this kind helped to build trust and rapport with local people and project staff and allowed them to gain new insights that were unlikely to be obtained from asking questions or facilitating discussions. Observation permitted a deeper understanding of relationships not only within communities but also between the community and other actors, and allowed a high degree of cross-checking of information collected in other ways. This technique is highly dependent on the skills of the observer and is resource-intensive; on the other hand, these skills can be nurtured and developed, and this sort of approach can be less demanding of local people's time. Given the concerns raised below regarding the time-consuming nature of some of the participatory approaches adopted, this is worth bearing in mind.

Although a comprehensive range of participatory techniques was used in the case studies, there are perhaps a limited number which seem to be particularly relevant and useful for impact assessment purposes. These would include time lines, well-being and preference ranking, impact flow diagrams, and trend

analysis. This kind of participatory work has to give greater recognition to existing power and social relations within communities; it must pay greater attention to people's time constraints and the opportunity cost to them of getting involved in an assessment. Again, these tools should be combined with other methods and sources of information in order to address the need for clearer standards of assessing the quality of processes of participatory inquiry. The findings from the case studies suggest that (in addition to the criteria mentioned in Table 8.1) in situations where impact assessment is primarily initiated by external agencies, the following criteria should be considered:

- a process or time-schedule agreeable both to the men *and women* in the communities and the researchers;
- efficient use of existing sources of information so as not to waste people's time collecting data that is already available;
- the development and continual adaptation of methods, based on a mutual analysis of their strengths and weaknesses;
- the extent to which the information that is gathered actually has an impact, in other words, actually produces change in practices or policies of the project or organisation being assessed.

The use of case studies (of individuals, communities, projects, and organisations) was prevalent in nearly all the countries involved. Case studies are particularly useful in complex situations where many variables interrelate and where outcomes and impact are likely to vary across different populations. What kind of study is chosen needs to be to be consciously thought through. Well chosen case studies and cross-case study analysis can add a lot of value to an assessment, particularly if they relate to wider policy matters which are of major interest.

Finally, the issues of attribution, cross-checking, and the importance of feedback remain, issues which are discussed throughout this book. None of the tools and methods used *on their own* can solve the problem of determining attribution, and even in combination they cannot prove it. However, if properly cross-checked, they provide a body of evidence that can be agreed, disputed, or amended, which can in turn contribute to a reasoned and plausible judgement. As Roger Riddell has stated:

In short, it is unnecessary to concentrate time, effort and resources on project or programme evaluation if firm conclusions can be drawn without using sophisticated techniques. Similarly if judgements made about qualitative aspects of projects are not substantially challenged by the relevant 'actors' or groups ... then purist worries about objectively assessing these factors become largely irrelevant. (Riddell 1990)

The organisational context

The previous chapter goes into some detail about how the case studies assessed the impact of projects and programmes on organisations, as well as how organisations in general approach and manage impact assessment. At the workshop that brought together many of those involved in the case study work, the issue of how organisations can help or hinder various forms of impact assessment was a recurring theme. This is linked to the growing interest, particularly among gender analysts, in the role that organisations and institutions play in producing and reproducing various forms of inequality, and in how their cultures, systems, and values determine what impact they achieve. In this sense, impact assessment also requires looking at the deep-rooted impact on those structures that embody relations of authority, power, and control and that determine the degree to which individuals and groups can exercise choice.

Development agencies, including large NGOs, are not immune from the problems confronting other bureaucracies in terms of complacency, hierarchy, inertia, and poor information flow, which can lead to loops of self-deception as feedback from activities is distorted, or manipulated as individuals seek to protect themselves. Senior managers who subscribe to the view that 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' will tend to go along with positive news and carry on without any checks until something 'breaks'. As Robert Chambers has suggested, this kind of institutional blindness has led to the most remarkable feature of development efforts over the last few decades: that 'we' were so wrong when 'we' thought we were so right (Chambers 1994).

Much of the good practice that emerges from the case studies and from recent work on impact assessment in other agencies (summarised in Chapter 7) focuses on ensuring that impact assessment processes are kept simple, relevant, and useful. Experience also underlines that an organisation needs to align its incentives, rewards, and systems so that they are compatible with a real desire to learn, and adapt its work and ways of working in the light of that learning. This requires a commitment from senior managers to ensure a coherence with other systems, to maintain the external and programme focus of the organisations' work, and to provide an accountability framework in which 'bottom-up' quality-control measures are properly represented and balanced with those of other stakeholder interests.

This means that any process of assessing impact not only has to be appropriate in terms of the complexity and the cost involved, but also has to be flexible and produce relevant, timely, accurate, and useable information that can satisfy different interests or stakeholders. The challenge for most organisations will be to develop appropriate processes and methods of

impact assessment, which recognise the limited time and financial resources available, and which are in harmony with the skills and experience of those at the 'sharp end' — especially those whom our efforts seek to benefit and those working on programmes 'in the field'. The approaches, tools, and methods presented in this book provide some answers to this challenge.

Much of the literature suggests that the past emphasis on 'independent' external, one-off evaluations as mechanisms of quality control often brought little of value to project managers, who saw the process as a justification, control, or policing function. This does not mean that external impact evaluations may not have their place, but rather that NGOs need to refocus on the 'front-line' and instil in staff a major preoccupation with learning systems at the programme level as a vital internal project activity. This is not only because unused or unusable information will not lead to any changes in practice; the problem is more fundamental. If information systems and evaluations are, or should be, largely based on the ongoing recording of project processes and on regular interaction with beneficiaries, then the quality and honesty of that recording becomes the critical issue. If this information is of poor quality, or simply a distortion of reality, then entire organisations can find themselves locked into a false picture of what they achieve as they synthesise, aggregate, and analyse primary data which is fundamentally flawed.

Providing the right incentives for this basic level of information collection properly is vital, and there is no better incentive than self-interest. In this case, self-interest relates to how useful the information will be in future to the person or organisation that collects it. A recent Action Aid study on impact assessment concluded that for

most local NGOs reporting, whether for their own Head Offices or for their donors, is a chore and for many, evaluation and impact assessment is assumed to be of greater interest to donors and Head Offices rather than the staff themselves. (Goyder et al. 1997, p. 47)

Seeking more reliable guidance of how things are going from the people and local staff involved in a project, and understanding how they are already monitoring impact in their own way, thus increases in significance. Our case studies provide some clues about the difficulties in meeting the diverse needs of local stakeholders and of more distant organisations, as well as indicating which tools and methods are particularly helpful in this process. However, many of these problems demonstrate not only the need to develop alternative assessment methods, but also the need to develop new organisational cultures and relationships.

Policy implications

This final section of this book explores some of the key policy implications which emerge from the case studies. These are grouped under the following headings: poverty and gender issues, resource allocation, and the future of NGOs.

Poverty and gender issues

Although the case studies' primary purpose was to explore and learn about approaches to and methods of impact assessment, the findings of these studies merit some attention. Several of the studies note that the very poorest groups, whether identified through wealth-ranking or by poverty-line measures, have either been excluded from projects or benefited less than less poor groups. This happens either because of the nature of the organisation running the projects in question (it may be a community-based or a membership organisation that the poorest do not or cannot join) or because of the nature of the intervention (for example, an agricultural project may demand labour inputs which the poorest cannot make, or a credit programme may demand repayments that the poorest do not feel able to make). However, there is also some evidence that the poorest can benefit proportionately more than richer households if they are strategically targeted, and that in some cases the incidence and severity of poverty decreased with the duration of NGO project involvement.

There is also some limited, if tantalising, evidence which suggests that poorer households when asked to compare the significance of collective services (health, education, water) which are often provided by the state, rank these higher than NGO projects, particularly those providing individualised services such as credit or agricultural extension. Better-off households rank NGO projects higher. This finding, if confirmed more widely, would clearly have important implications for the complementarity of NGO/ state roles, and indeed for the importance of NGOs not only in helping to stimulate demand by strengthening community organisations, but also in facilitating supply by advocating for adequate funding of state-service provision.

As far as women's status is concerned, most case studies report improvements in their material well-being, household relations, and self-image. However, some note that this has been accompanied by further increases in workload, little change to control over assets within the home and no change in deep-seated gender norms, for instance regarding dowry payments. As a recent OECD/ DAC study on NGOs also notes, 'what is clearly proving most difficult is to introduce processes which have a more positive and systemic impact on the status of women' (OECD/ DAC 1998).

There is also some evidence to suggest that where poorer groups and women have started to push for, and in some cases achieve, a level of systemic

change, this often requires more support from intermediaries and external agencies, albeit of a nature that is different from a traditional project relationship. This has important implications for the notions of hand-over, independence, and autonomy which pervade the literature on NGO organisational development. The development of 'vertical' relationships and support networks (for example, regional, national, or international) as well as horizontal ones can provide a more appropriate framework for collaboration and advocacy than single project relationships. This can allow change to be promoted at several levels simultaneously and the debate can be shifted to those organisations, regions, and capitals where the best chance of achieving change exists.

Resource allocation

The current weight given to assessing impact, rather than inputs and outputs, is welcome because it stresses the importance of understanding how a positive and significant difference can be made to people's lives. However, although past performance is a guide to future performance, it is not the only one. The relationship between projects, the organisations that run and support them, and the context in which they are situated, is a complex one which produces a wide range of possible impacts. The same inputs at different times or in different places will produce different results. These results will in turn affect various groups of people differently. This suggests first that an understanding of context, local power relations, poverty, and social dynamics is a necessary precondition to achieving impact.

Second, the ability of NGOs to listen to and learn from local people and organisations and adapt their support in the light of this learning is critical in ensuring that past impact can be sustained in the future. This, as discussed above, is dependent on organisations having a congruence between its incentives, systems, and culture that permits learning and adaptation as well as an ability to balance the interests of a range of stakeholders. Third, the ability to plan, manage, and account for funds received clearly remain important to organisational health, although the capacities and competencies needed will vary depending on the size of the organisation. Fourth, the ability to innovate and take risks will be necessary, particularly if the poorest are to be included in development efforts. Investing in projects with 'safe returns' and guaranteed future impact is likely to mean adhering to the status quo.

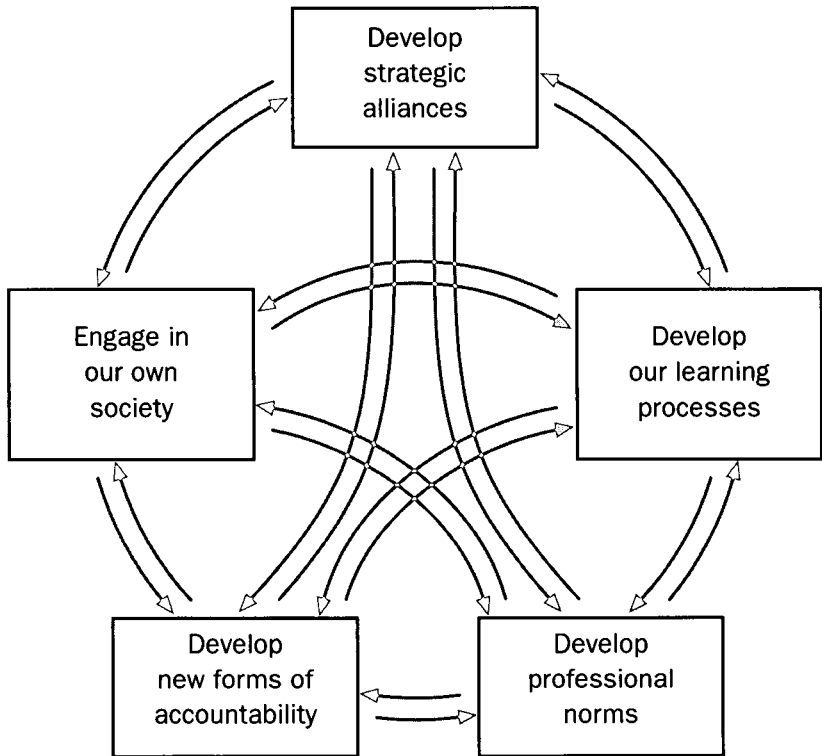
Finally, the ability to work with others and to use and communicate the findings of impact assessment exercises or other learning is going to be increasingly important in order to promote broader systemic change. If impact is going to be increased then this too will become a more central aspect than it has been in the past.

In short, the results of impact assessment exercises are insufficient *on their own* to make sensible decisions about resource allocation to projects or organisations. There are other criteria, notably understanding of context; the ability to listen, learn, adapt, and innovate; management capacity; and the ability to work with others and to communicate learning.

The future of NGOs: Towards a virtuous circle?

This book has tried to illustrate how a number of NGOs from around the world are struggling with the very complex set of issues which relate to assessing the impact of their work. We hope that in developing and sharing these experiences and our learning we can, in a small way, contribute to countering one aspect of the vicious circle described in Chapter 1 and thus help to develop a ‘virtuous circle’.

Figure 8.1: Towards a virtuous circle?



This circle, like the vicious circle, has five mutually reinforcing elements: increased recognition of the need to develop institutional learning and impact assessment processes; the development of strategic alliances with other NGOs and other sectors, including state structures; a deepening engagement with social and political processes in the NGOs' own countries of origin; the development of new forms of accountability; and the further development of professional norms and standards within and across agencies.

In order for the circle to achieve enough momentum, a number of things must happen simultaneously. The lessons from the case studies indicate that this will involve not only the development and sharing of new tools and methods of impact assessment, but also the enhancement of broader strategies for institutional learning. However, this will only make a difference if the current competition for resources, personnel, and ideas between NGOs and other actors — notably the state — is reworked into creative, strategic alliances. This, from an impact assessment perspective, means less emphasis on selfishly seeking to attribute change to an individual project or organisation, and more emphasis on how agencies *combine* to produce significant change for people living poverty. On many occasions, this in turn will mean sacrificing individual agency profile for the greater good. Impact assessment is about becoming more open and transparent about what is, and what is not, achievable in the future. Change is not likely to take place if assessment simply becomes a means of blowing the organisational trumpet even louder.

Some of the organisations in the case studies are beginning to transform themselves by putting down stronger and deeper roots in their own societies. For some, this has always been part of their identity; for others, including Oxfam GB and Novib, this means engaging even more in the UK and the Netherlands. It means making the connections between poverty and exclusion 'at home' and abroad, and demonstrating that the stories of change from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe are not simply about a need for further compassion and money, but are also about inspiring, insightful, and creative work. As these roots grow deeper, accountability patterns will shift too. This is important if we wish to see a future based on notions of interdependence and mutuality, rather than dependence and hand-outs.

Change in these elements of the circle could combine to bring about a situation which gives a more realistic portrayal of what NGOs can achieve on their own; it will have a greater degree of modesty and humility as well as a recognise the importance of working with others. This in turn will help to decrease the gap between rhetoric and reality and encourage greater realisation that the potential to solve problems 'at home' and 'out there' is

enhanced by multiple perspectives based on a more effective and honest sharing of experience and ideas. It is interesting to note in this context that recent research shows that the degree of a donor country's commitment to social justice at home is positively correlated to their commitment to social justice not only in their aid programme but in all aspects of their international relations (Olsen 1996).

Change in these elements of the circle would also lead to increased trust, built on shared values *and* a respect for difference. Faed by ideologies of globalisation, the global NGO community must find ways of overcoming the danger of fragmentation and irrelevance: alliances must lead to more than mere tolerant co-existence where we agree to disagree. Our ultimate aim must be to create groupings in which organisations that do share realities based on common understanding and analysis as well as common involvement in struggles for justice and equity, can move forward together.

Moreover, new notions of 'partnership' and change could be created which are based on clear and agreed standards of performance. The reaction against the approach to development which proposes the universal blueprint of modernisation, particularly by NGOs, is to argue for the importance of context, diversity, looking at processes, and understanding difference. While this reaction is understandable, some authors argue that it has undermined the notions of universal standards and rights. If everything is different and relative, then it is difficult to imagine universally applicable standards which suggest some absolute hierarchy of values (Duffield 1995).

Fifty years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was ratified — and at a time when there is a resurgence of rights-based approaches to international relations — the challenge for NGOs in general, and for impact assessment processes in particular, remains to tell the stories of how individual men, women, and children, and their communities, struggle to defend their universal rights in the face of overwhelming odds, and how they can be better supported in doing so.