MEASURING CHANGE: THE CHALLENGES

The challenge of measuring change is establishing causality: ‘Did A (our intervention) cause B (the observed change)?’

Development agencies are concerned about human processes. The very nature of our development interventions means that our programmes and projects are:

- Complex
- Involve many different interventions and actors
- Subject to unexpected events
- Implemented with limited resources.

Thus we are never going to be able to measure change (impact) in the same way that medical drugs can be trialled. We have so many influencing factors and external variables that all need to be taken into consideration when trying to identify change particularly when we are asked to prove attribution. Many projects/programmes/organisations we are involved in demand that we attribute change or impact to our work i.e. provide measurable evidence of the specific impact that our intervention has had - an extremely difficult exercise given the complex contexts we work in.

Some people say ‘wave a white flag - surrender the attempt to measure impact. But the reality is that we cannot give up. Not only are funders demanding that we demonstrate how we are making a difference, our own striving for greater effectiveness also demands that we find ways to measure change.

However, we need to accept that the methods that we use to measure change and establish causality must be appropriate and sustainable given the level of complexity involved in development processes and the money available to conduct assessments.

So is it possible to measure change? - There is no magic bullet; it takes time and effort.

MEASURING IMPACT

‘Impact assessment is the systematic analysis of the lasting or significant changes – positive or negative, intended or not intended – in people’s lives brought about by a given action or series of actions.’

(Chris Roche, p21, Impact Assessment for Development Agencies, Oxfam 1999)

The main impact question that we all aim to answer is: ‘Are we making a difference and to whom?’

There is sometimes confusion in terminology: should the consequences of our interventions be called ‘outcomes’ or ‘impact’. What if any is the difference? The impact ladder is helpful in clarifying this:
The ‘ladder’ also shows that we can’t measure impact without also measuring the lower parts of the ladder because the logic of our interventions is that each leads to the next. For this reason, gender and diversity awareness and considerations also need to be included at each step in the ladder.

Another way of looking at it (adapted from Jerry Adams, 2013):

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