Monitoring and evaluating empowerment processes

Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation

Jeremy Holland and Laurent Ruedin

The process of empowerment cannot be externally controlled and managed; if donors use methods that are technocratic and controlling they can have unintended disempowering effects. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) must be used with care in the context of empowerment. Donors have to strike a balance between the flexibility required in supporting empowerment and social change and their need to demonstrate results. Monitoring and assessing empowerment can encourage donors to recognise that they themselves exercise power and reflect on the impact this has on the empowerment process. Donors should also recognise the limits to their power within larger political structure. Participatory methods for monitoring and evaluation can be efficient, producing data for analysis and action to support empowerment.

OECD

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Key messages:

- Empowerment is a process that cannot be externally controlled and managed. If empowerment programmes are managed, monitored and evaluated in ways that are top-down, technocratic and controlling, donors' actions can have unintended disempowering effects. While monitoring and evaluation tools are useful for learning and improving effectiveness, in the context of empowerment work they must be designed and used with care, so that the monitoring and evaluation process itself can be supportive of empowerment outcomes.

- There is a tension for donors between adopting a flexible and enabling role in supporting an empowerment process of social change and the obligation to demonstrate results and fulfil internal rules and regulations.

- Understanding what works, what does not and why is central to this evolving and deepening self-awareness and to the process of changing donor/partner relationships. Monitoring and assessing empowerment can encourage donors to recognise that they themselves exercise power in their relationship with in-country partners and to reflect on the impact that they have on empowerment processes.

- Donors should recognise the limits to their power within bigger political structures and processes.

- Participatory methods can be quick and efficient, producing data in a timely fashion for evidence-based analysis and action in ways that support empowerment.

This Good Practice Note highlights some of the particularities of monitoring and evaluation empowerment efforts and presents an approach to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) that can help donors steer their support for empowerment while fostering learning and reflection.

Why is monitoring and evaluating empowerment important?

Donors and partners increasingly recognise the importance of monitoring and evaluating development policies and programmes. M&E is meant to contribute to insights about what does and does not work and why, and should enable programme changes that will make donors and partners more effective at supporting empowerment. Monitoring is a continuing function that uses systematic collection of data on specified indicators to provide management and the main stakeholders of an ongoing development intervention with indications of the extent of progress and achievement of objectives in the use of allocated funds (OECD, 2002). Evaluation on the other hand is the systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed project, programme or policy, its design, implementation and results. The aim is to determine the relevance and fulfilment of objectives, development efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. An evaluation should provide information that is credible and useful, enabling the incorporation of lessons learned into the decision-making process of both partners and donors. Because these processes involve defining objectives and determining the worth or significance of a development intervention, power relations are affected by the way monitoring and evaluation are carried out.

Donors also recognise the importance of interventions that seek to empower poor people in their economic, social and political relationships. Promoting empowerment is about transforming structures and institutions while developing individual and group capacities. Empowerment happens "when individuals and organised groups are able to

imagine their world differently and to realise that vision by changing the relations of power that have been keeping them in poverty" (Policy Guidance Note, p. 19). Empowerment involves changes in relationships. As with many development processes, these are not simple cause and effect changes in which a single donor action can be attributed to a set of outputs and outcomes. Empowerment is complex, dynamic and contextual and can be difficult to observe and to quantify.

At the same time donors increasingly recognise their accountability to their own constituents – parliament and public – as well as to those whom empowerment programmes are meant to empower (beneficiaries) and so emphasise "managing for results". Given the growing importance of showing results (to parliaments, managers and tax payers) the risk for donors is to look for attribution and measureable outcomes, at the expense of supporting complex, risky and difficult-to-predict empowering processes.

This produces a tension for donors between adopting a flexible and enabling role in supporting an empowerment process of social change (Guijt, 2007) and the obligation to demonstrate results and fulfil internal rules and regulations.

Because of this tension, monitoring and evaluating empowerment can be very good or very bad. At its best, monitoring and evaluation enable donors and partners to understand their agency and to learn from experience to more effectively influence change on the ground. At its worst, monitoring and evaluation reinforce donors' exercise of power – and disempowers others – in their relationship with in-country stakeholders.

What makes monitoring and evaluating empowerment difficult?

Monitoring empowerment involves tracking changes in relationships. These are not simple cause and effect changes in which a "single event" outcome can be attributed to a set of inputs and outputs. Empowerment is complex, dynamic and contextual and can be difficult to observe and to quantify.

Monitoring and evaluating can themselves impact power dynamics, between donors and partners, and managers/evaluators and local stakeholders. Evaluators and managers are therefore actors in, as well as observers of, empowerment processes.

Donors are more used to measuring observable effects – metrics, such as an increase in household income or in girls attending primary school. Looking at the (more difficult to observe) changes in power relationships that may have resulted in these shifts, can support our understanding of how empowerment happens. Evaluating the changing relationships that resulted in these measurable effects enables donors to test their assumptions that their interventions are empowering people.

Donors in country offices often have a good understanding of the social reality in their country but face challenges. They are required both to manage their local partnerships in an effective and empowering way and to report on results for upward accountability. Both are important and relate to different needs. Furthermore, the pressure to show results often translates as a pressure to give attention to simple, observable effects.

But just because empowerment is complicated does not mean we should avoid monitoring it. Simplifying complexity can be dangerous, but it is possible to present changes in power relations in a simple but insightful way. This can be done, for example, by unpacking different components of empowerment, relating to individuals, groups, organisations, networks and systems (SDC, 2006).

Who is monitoring and evaluating empowerment?

Much of the donor debate around strengthening the monitoring and evaluation of donor interventions is "donor-centric", concerned with how we as donors can measure and improve impact of a single donor intervention. This perspective tends to promote a top-down approach to monitoring and evaluation. Data needs and instruments are identified in donor offices and information is extracted from passive beneficiaries on the ground by external experts through rigid, imposed monitoring procedures (Guijt, 1999).

Development evaluators, including donor agency evaluation units, are moving away from this donor-centric approach towards supporting country-led M&E. This positive shift in approach acknowledges the disempowering effects of donor-centric thinking and recognises the complex nature of development processes. As described in the DAC Quality Standards for Development Evaluation (2010), "the way development evaluation is carried out must reflect the new [development co-operation] context, becoming more harmonised, better aligned and increasingly country-led, to meet the evaluation needs of all partners" (OECD, 2010). Joint evaluation is one way in which donors are working together to capture broader development processes and move towards a less donor-centric approach that actively involves multiple partners in assessing the results of development co-operation. Another way donors can support this shift is by helping to monitor and evaluate capacities of those working on empowerment in country offices and partner countries. While further progress in the way donors evaluate is needed, the DAC Evaluation Quality Standards encourage a partnership approach and the involvement of relevant stakeholders in evaluation processes.

A participatory approach to M&E challenges this top down perspective to ownership and control by asking "whose reality counts?" (Chambers, 1997) and "who counts reality?" (Estrella and Gaventa, 1998). A participatory approach respects local knowledge and facilitates local ownership and control of data generation and analysis (Chambers, 1994, 1997). This aspect of ownership and control in participatory research is intended to provide space for local people to establish their own analytical frameworks and to be in a position to challenge "development from above" (Mukherjee, 1995). In contrast to the individualised observation and discussions in much top-down investigation, participatory research also focuses on public and collective reflection and action, as illustrated by the case of a participatory impact assessment of habitat management approaches in Eastern Africa (Box 9.1). At its most political, participatory research is a *process* in which reflection is internalised and promotes raised political consciousness. In this way, population involvement in research shifts from *passive* to *active*. Participatory M&E can, therefore, be done in ways that actually support empowerment by providing opportunities for agency and shifting power dynamics in the development co-operation relationship.

What are the controversies?

Supporting empowerment processes does not fit easily with development management, *i.e.* with "managerialist" approaches to development interventions, implemented using a logframe instrument that can reduce complexity to a simplified, pre-defined, linear and easily measurable change process. Many aspects of empowerment are difficult to quantify, methodologies and indicators are not well developed and there is not enough experience among donors and partners on monitoring and evaluating empowerment processes. This situation of an inability to measure and predict change can be unsettling to donors under pressure to demonstrate value for money. One way to support more effective monitoring

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Box 9.1. **Participatory Impact Assessment of the "push-pull" habitat management approach in eastern Africa**

In eastern Africa, maize and sorghum are the main staple and cash crops for millions of small-scale farmers. Unfortunately, these two cereals are susceptible to insect pests, parasitic weed and to low and declining soil fertility. As a result, the food security and livelihoods of millions of people in the region are constantly at risk. The International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology *(icipe),* in Kenya, in collaboration with other partners, developed a novel habitat management approach, known as "push-pull technology" (PPT) which from 1997 was integrated with maize, and later sorghum-based cropping systems in Kenya and in eastern Uganda. Today this technology has reached more than 25 000 farmers in eastern Africa.

In 2009, *icipe* mandated an independent organisation to conduct a comprehensive participatory impact assessment of push–pull management in order to establish its impact on the livelihoods of smallholder farmers in eastern Africa and their perception towards the technology. *icipe* also saw this study as crucial in placing focus on communities as "clients" and not "beneficiaries" of development interventions, thereby increasing the accountability of research and development organisations.

Based on the principle of a peer-review mechanism, this assessment was designed using a participatory farmer-to-farmer evaluation approach. Forty-eight farmers, after receiving training, conducted this assessment in 24 villages in western Kenya and eastern Uganda through reciprocal visits interviewing 144 fellow farmers, supported by accompanying facilitators. They talked to their peers about adoption, effects and impacts, technology adaptations made by farmers as well as the role and performance of research and extension. A similar exercise was conducted with research and extension organisations involved in the development and dissemination of the push-pull technology.

The impact assessment methodology generated quantitative data on increased crop yields under push pull technology and qualitative analysis of knock-on benefits as well as concerns about the limitations on push pull, its uptake and its impact. It also generated valuable learning and recommendations for further research, up-scaling and policy-making. All participating actors perceived the participatory assessment method as an eye opener fostering learning from each other. In addition – as an another added value – the capacity-building (especially of the farmer evaluators) and discussion amongst peers during the exchange visits left many farmers empowered as evaluators and more rich in knowledge on PPT.

Source: Fischler, M. (2010), *Impact assessment of push-pull technology developed and promoted by* icipe *and partners in eastern Africa, icipe* Science Press, Nairobi.

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and evaluation approaches is to identify measurements that capture, albeit imperfectly, important dimensions of changes in power and that can be complemented by more interpretive and explanatory forms of qualitative research (discussed further below).

Criticism is levelled at donors that the process of monitoring and evaluating empowerment projects can itself be disempowering for people living in poverty. Donors are challenged by development practitioners who ask "whose knowledge counts?" and ask who should lead and own the process of monitoring and the knowledge that is generated. Who is being asked whether the way that their realities are being assessed and presented has validity and meaning?

Donors' actions in supporting empowerment are not depoliticised technocratic exercises. Programme staff, managers and evaluators are not external and independent of empowerment

processes; they have agency and a political agenda and should recognise and try to reflect on their role in, and impact on, development processes, including changes in power relations. Systematic monitoring and evaluation can aid in this reflective process by improving understanding of how empowerment works and providing evidence on impacts.

Donor staff members in country offices face organisational challenges and tradeoffs. They have limited time and resources, with M&E budget lines difficult to justify and protect. They work in partnership with local agencies and statistical bureaux which often have limited capacity and resources and a fixed view of which monitoring methods are appropriate and rigorous. Country offices feel pressure from their hierarchy to prioritise and measure deliverables/results that are tangible, quantifiable and easy to relay to constituents/taxpayers. This can result in an over-emphasis on easily measurable indicators that do not necessarily tell us much about actual changes in empowerment as experienced by people "on the ground".

A "straight jacket" approach to M&E is rarely useful for analysing complex processes in varied development contexts and may be particularly counter-productive when looking at empowerment processes. There is no "one size fits all" or "gold standard" for M&E. When delivering immunisation campaigns or educational inputs, for instance, attribution can be relatively easy. Changes in power relations, however, are not single-event outcomes but are dynamic and process-based. Understanding what has caused changes in empowerment requires the participation of those "being empowered" because the causality chain cannot necessarily be observed from the outside, the way it can for other types of interventions. It is very difficult for donors, using generic indicators or predetermined monitoring tools, to understand changes in power relations or establish the direction and magnitude of cause and effect. While monitoring and reporting standards must generally comply with programme rules and regulations, such approaches cannot be applied blindly – particularly for the context-specific work of empowerment. Some flexibility is needed in how monitoring is done in different settings and who takes the lead on monitoring power relations. Likewise, evaluation approaches and methodology should be selected based on the context and taking power relations into consideration. The purpose, scope and questions of stakeholders will determine which evaluation approach and methodology is most appropriate in a given setting (OECD, 2010).

There is linked debate about the importance of valuing a range of methods and understanding better what rigour means for different methods. Different methodological traditions have different tests of trustworthiness but these are often not made explicit. This can create controversy over the use of mixed methods to interpret and analyse changes in power relations. There are quantitative and qualitative dimensions to empowerment and there is a need to both describe and explain change. Work on "measuring results" and "using numbers" recognises the need to find indicators which capture changes in power relations and which are sensitive to social difference. This work also stresses the importance of integrating indicators with a narrative that can present and interpret the underlying power dynamics that cannot be reduced to numbers and "objective truth". The importance of analysing and interpreting change gets lost particularly when the link between monitoring, evaluating and learning is absent in debates. Monitoring and evaluation is meant to contribute to insights about what does and does not work and why.

How to monitor and evaluate empowerment: good practices

M&E can combine methods and data effectively to describe and explain empowerment. It can combine measurable indicators of change with powerful qualitative narratives that explain change and help donors to interpret and steer their interventions. Without these analytical insights into the complex "missing middle" between interventions and impacts, researchers and policy analysts tend to make "interpretive leaps" of analysis based on what is measured. The danger here is that what is not quantifiable becomes unimportant while "what is measurable and measured then becomes what is real and what matters" (Chambers, 1995). Conversely, if qualitative research inductively throws up interesting, often surprising and sometimes counterintuitive relationships and patterns, quantitative research is then able to ask "how much?" and establish how confident we can be in these "working hypotheses". This iterative relationship between describing and explaining provides the key to the effective combination of methods and data for monitoring and evaluating empowerment interventions. The focus should be on producing credible information that is useful for supporting more effective programmes or accountability for results.

A "fit for purpose" set of empowerment indicators is one which provides sufficient description of changes in power relations to frame and prompt in-depth analysis of those changes in ways that will lead to improved empowerment interventions and help hold decision makers accountable for the impacts they have on people's lives. Quantitative methods generate empowerment indicators of objective and subjective changes. Objective indicators measure observable changes in the frequency and types of interaction which serve as a proxy for changes in underlying power relations. Examples of objective indicators include counting the number of citizens participating in a public meeting or voting in elections, the number of women working in non-traditional segments of the labour market, or the number of times budget cycle details are made public. These proxy data on empowerment should be disaggregated, for example by sex, age, or by ethnic, religious or caste background to illuminate disparate effects and changes in power relations between relevant groups of society.

Measurements of changes in the frequency and types of interaction can be generated from observation, programme records or recall, (though recall is often not as reliable as other forms of data collection). Recall indicators on the whole elicit data on individual experiences and therefore should be used with individual respondents, for example as part of a survey module. One Afrobarometer indicator[1] of accountability, transparency and corruption asks, for example:

In the past year, how often, if ever, have you had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to government officials in order to:

A. get a document or a permit?

B. get water or sanitation services?

C. avoid a problem with the police?

Subjective indicators of empowerment measure the "quality", or effectiveness, of changes in power relations against discrete scales. Scoring can be conducted by panels of key informants. In the DRC, for example, a new DFID-funded media project designed to encourage freedom of expression and good governance has developed a monitoring and evaluation system drawing on subjective indicator scoring by panels of citizens (Holland and Thirkell, 2009). There are five panels in five main urban areas of DRC, composed of five people each. The members are

a mixture of people with some journalism experience and average "users" of the media. The panels will meet twice a year to discuss and respond to a questionnaire. In this way, they will monitor the general situation of the media in DRC and how it is evolving, providing the view of "ordinary" but interested people from across the country.

Scoring of subjective indicators of empowerment can also be conducted by individuals or groups in communities that are being influenced by donor programmes, generating data against discrete scales either individually or in groups using a community score card. Community score cards have been used widely as an interactive monitoring tool to empower service users in their relationship with service providers by eliciting user perceptions on the quality, accessibility and relevance of various public services. Score cards have also been adapted and used to monitor power relations as the basis for local change, as illustrated in Jamaica (Box 9.2).

Box 9.2. **Monitoring and evaluation of police-youth relations in Jamaica**

In Jamaica, the Cabinet Office, with financial support from DFID, promoted a system of locally-generated indicators designed to improve social policy design and implementation. This system of community-based policy monitoring involved community members across different localities identifying their own indicators, and teams of volunteers measuring and monitoring progress against these indicators in comparison with other localities. The first policy area selected for collecting such information was that of "youth inclusion", and specifically police-youth relations.

Young people met in small groups in their communities to produce community score cards of police-youth relations. Sessions began with the group being split into two smaller groups and each performing a short role-play, one depicting good police-youth relations from the perspective of youths and the other from the perspective of police officers. The whole group was then asked to describe what constitutes "good" police-youth relations. Following the description and characteristic linkage, the groups were asked to discuss further their general understanding of each characteristic, *i.e.* defining and coming to a common understanding of each characteristic to be scored and analysed. The participants were then asked to score the current situation using the community score card. They were asked to justify these scores and to discuss causes, effects and possible solutions.

The following five indicators were identified that captured three elements of empowerment in the relationship between youth and police (the existence of choice, the exercise of choice and the outcome of choice) and scored using a 5 point score (1= Very poor; 2= Poor; 3= Fair; 4= Good; 5= Excellent):

- level of youth access to information about police activities and services

- level of youth willingness to use police services (*e.g.* reporting incidents)

- ability of youth to officially complain about inappropriate police behaviour/action

- level of youth willingness to officially complain about inappropriate police behaviour/action

- level of youth hope that police-youth relations can improve

Source: Holland J., *et al.* (2007), *Monitoring Empowerment in Policy and Programme Interventions: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, Q Squared Working Paper No. 45, November, University of Toronto.

Quantitative measurements can be sequenced with qualitative research methods (including interviews, observation, group discussions and peer ethnography) to provide in-depth analysis of why behavioural changes and power relations have or have not occurred. An example of a monitoring and evaluation of self-help groups in Andhra Pradesh (Box 9.3) illustrates how merging the results from the qualitative and the quantitative evaluation can generate a powerful set of reporting messages to help steer a donor empowerment programme.

Box 9.3. **Monitoring and evaluation of self-help groups in Andhra Pradesh**

Since the mid-1990s, the government of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh has been encouraging women-only grassroots organisations at the village level called self-help groups. By 2007, over 700 000 such groups had been formed, partly facilitated by two externally-funded programmes supported by DFID and the World Bank which provided funds and technical training to self-help groups. The World Bank's evaluation of these programmes utilised panel data collected in 2005 and 2007. Responses to the village questionnaire, which listed all the self-help groups in the village, confirmed a continued rise in the number of these organisations, but the individual-level data showed a drop in participation in self-help groups. This apparent discrepancy was readily explained by the qualitative data collected alongside the quantitative survey which revealed the build up of non-functioning self-felp groups – through a lack of skills, non-payment, factionalism and so on – which nonetheless remained on the books. Had the researchers anticipated this attrition of Self-Help Groups – through preceding qualitative research – the survey could have included questions regarding the reasons for dropouts.

Self-help group dropout had affected the poor most, with participation rates for the upper deciles over twice those of the lower deciles. The qualitative fieldwork pointed to some possible policy responses to this problem, including support to illiterate groups in record-keeping (and adoption of simpler bookkeeping systems suitable for semi-literates), finding alternative payment arrangements for the poorest households (lower payments or not requiring payment on a monthly basis), the need for animal insurance to accompany livestock loans, and defining a different (social protection) model to assist those unable to engage in productive activities.

Source: White H. (2008), *Of probits and participation: The use of mixed methods in quantitative impact evaluation*, Working Paper No. 7, Network of Networks on Impact Evaluation (NONIE), *www.worldbank. org/ieg/nonie/docs/WP7_White.pdf.*

Participating in monitoring and evaluating can itself be empowering. Monitoring and evaluating can feel highly extractive and disempowering for those being "monitored" or "assessed". But participatory monitoring and evaluation can empower "passive beneficiaries", providing space for local people to establish their own analytical framework, determine what changes are valued and to be in a position to challenge "development from above" (Chambers, 1994, 1997; Mukherjee, 1995). The above example of participatory monitoring of youth-police relations in Jamaica (Box 9.2) illustrates the value of local processes of participatory monitoring and evaluation for transformation within and beyond communities doing the measuring. A similar example comes from Bangladesh, where a quantitative tool was developed for participatory M&E of empowerment within a land rights social movement (Box 9.4).

Participatory methods can generate robust quantitative data. Research teams have shown that it is possible to generate statistics which would be taken seriously by policy makers from research using participatory methods. In today's development co-operation climate of growing accountability pressures, it is important to be able to demonstrate empowerment

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Box 9.4. **Participatory M&E within a social movement in Bangladesh**

A participatory grassroots review of a land rights social movement in Bangladesh generated a set of quantitative indicators for monitoring and evaluating empowerment. The review used tried and tested participatory rural appraisal (PRA) methods – including the mood meter, well-being analysis, scoring, network mapping, timelines, flow diagrams, drawings and drama – to facilitate local analysis of changes in power relations. The review generated more than 8 000 key statements from groups and committees within the movement. These were clustered into four categories of group empowerment (political, social, economic and capability) and cross-tabulated against three levels of developmental progression (awareness, confidence and capability, and effectiveness and self-sustaining). Some 132 indicators were mapped onto this matrix as a baseline for annual participatory M&E, with a happy face assigned to those indicators that had been achieved and an unhappy face to those that had not been achieved, prompting an action plan for making better progress on those indicators. One participant from a men's group commented: "The process is very important – it is like looking in a mirror. When we find out what we have not been able to achieve we make a plan to take action. We have been a group for nearly 23 years and if we had done this before it would have made a big difference. We would have been able to pick up our lackings earlier".

While forming the basis for reflection and action for the "primary stakeholders" within the movement, some indicators were also useful for "secondary stakeholders", including movement field staff, programme staff and external donors.

Source: Jupp D. *et al.*(2010), "Measuring Empowerment? Ask Them: Quantifying qualitative outcomes from people's own analysis. Insights for results-based management from the experience of a social movement in Bangladesh", *Sida Studies in Evaluation 2010*, Vol. 1.

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results. If we cannot adequately capture the value and impact of empowerment work it will be difficult to justify its continued funding. The key is to encourage the use of M&E in ways that support, rather than undermine, empowerment processes.

The case studies from Jamaica and Bangladesh illustrate that, when given the opportunity and tools, people can effectively map, count, estimate, compare and value through participatory research (Chambers, 2007). Participatory methods can be quick and efficient, producing data in a timely fashion for evidence-based analysis and action in ways that support empowerment. Statistics generated through participatory methods can also be robustly aggregated and scaled up through (limited and justified) standardisation of specific questions in participatory surveys or group discussion. As more work on monitoring and evaluating empowerment is done, the toolbox of effective methods and useful indicators will grow, providing more options for useful approaches to M&E.

In order for participatory M&E to be taken seriously by policy makers, one key requirement is to produce results from a sufficiently large sample to capture variability and draw inference for aggregated analysis. This can imply working in a larger number of research sites than is usually the case with participatory research. In the Bangladesh case (Box 9.4), for example, a carefully designed sampling procedure captured the major variables in the social movement's operating landscape. Some 50% of the twelve operating areas were selected thus providing a representation of a range of geographic areas; new and old social movement areas; those with higher concentrations of Hindu groups or tribal groups. There was a concern that a sample of 30 groups (as recommended by the TOR) from a total of 4,446 at the time was too small a sample but finally it was decided that

in-depth discussions with groups could be held if the sample size remained small and this would ultimately be more useful for the purpose.

Simple analytical frameworks can be employed to evaluate empowering change and help donors to steer their interventions. An analytical lens that focuses on trying to capture the degree to which projects are empowering is likely to reveal new insights into what works and what is most valued. This can also focus attention on the empowering changes that "beneficiaries" themselves value, such as more skills, better household relations and a higher status in local communities. DFID in Bangladesh, for example, has recently adapted an empowerment analytical framework to understand the empowerment impact of its extreme poverty programme interventions (Box 9.5).

Box 9.5. An empowerment analytical framework for understanding programme interventions: the DFID Bangladesh Extreme Poverty Programme

The objective of DfID Bangladesh's Extreme Poverty Programmes is to support 6 million extreme poor to lift themselves out of extreme poverty through a mixture of asset and cash transfers, skills development, savings and policy change. This objective cannot be met without empowerment, even though empowerment itself is never mentioned explicitly in any of the project documentation. The existing M&E framework was focused on inputs and outputs and thus failing to capture what the programme beneficiaries most valued, skills, better relations with their husbands, better status in their communities. This is often the case. What donors and development agencies think the programmes are achieving is not what the participants necessarily value. A renewed focus on trying to capture the degree to which projects are empowering is likely to reveal new insights into what works and what is most valued and thus this can lead to increased value for money.

To this end the project adopted and simplified an empowerment analytical framework (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005) to capture and measure empowerment in the Extreme Poverty Programmes. The framework locates empowerment around choice and the effectiveness of choices. It also captures the dynamic relationship between asset-based agency and the opportunity structures (formal and informal institutions) that govern people's behaviour as citizens, economic actors and social actors. The empowerment framework suggests that investments and interventions can empower people by focusing on this relationship between agency and structure. Interventions that improve agency and enhance opportunity structures can increase people's capacity to make transformative choices, and this capacity in turn can bring about other development outcomes. Also developed and adapted were simple participatory tools to enable the donors to elicit indicators of empowerment from participants in the programme. This process is at an early stage but initial feedback suggests that the process itself can be empowering. The exercises prompt participants to reflect and analyse their own situation and think about different options and choices. For extremely poor people, this is often the first opportunity they have had to do this.

Having an overall framework for empowerment is immensely valuable. This framework provides an analytical context or lens through which to assess interventions. Thus it enables the donor to try to capture process and causality and to reflect on how programme inputs interact with the external environment to influence changes –positive or negative, expected or emergent – in programme outcomes.

Source: Philippa Thomas, personal communication; DFID, Bangladesh (2010), *Capturing and Measuring Empowerment: A How To Note*, DFID, Dhaka.

Qualitative data can be used to generate narratives of change (stories) that are powerful in interpreting and explaining changes in power relations. Stories are able to convey complex and multi-layered ideas in a simple and memorable form to culturally diverse audiences (Snowden, 2005). Stories powerfully connect and resonate with policy makers. A story is understood to be a chain of events presented in a coherent narrative that makes sense to its audience (Eyben, 2009). A case study is a story used to illuminate particular themes and issues supported by broader analysis. Stories are good at describing processes involving many actors and multiple sets of relationships. As part of the monitoring of empowerment of youth in Jamaica described in Box 9.2, analytical narratives were generated through peer ethnography[2] (Hawkins and Price, 2007), involving a series of in-depth conversational interviews carried out over a three-month period. These interviews explored the power relations underlying the perception scores of police-youth relations. The ethnographic study also added a human face to the scores and, when presented to a policy audience by a grassroots Jamaican researcher, resonated strongly with audience members. Similarly in the Bangladesh case described in Box 9.4, social movement members produced analytical narratives of change using theatrical performances to dramatise and shed light on changing power relations resulting from social movement membership. A group of women, for example, acted out three scenes, the first depicting life before joining the movement, the second depicting the current situation and the third looking into the future. The powerful performances, recorded on video, depicted clear and unambiguous examples of what empowerment meant for the group members, with no attempt at outsider "facipulation".

Monitoring and steering donor support is most effective when it is integrated with reflexive donor practice that promotes organisational learning. Monitoring and evaluating empowerment can encourage donor organisations to challenge their own behaviour and practice. One important element is to focus on the use and communication of M&E data to support learning. One way of conceptualising this is the idea of "double-loop", adaptive learning (Figure 9.1) for organisational change, with stories of failure and success shared and interrogated. "Double-loop" learning involves questioning the underlying purpose and values behind one's actions (as is done in evaluation), while "single-loop" learning is corrective management within a pre-given framework (Argyris and Schön, 1974). The concept of the

Figure 9.1. **Double-loop learning**
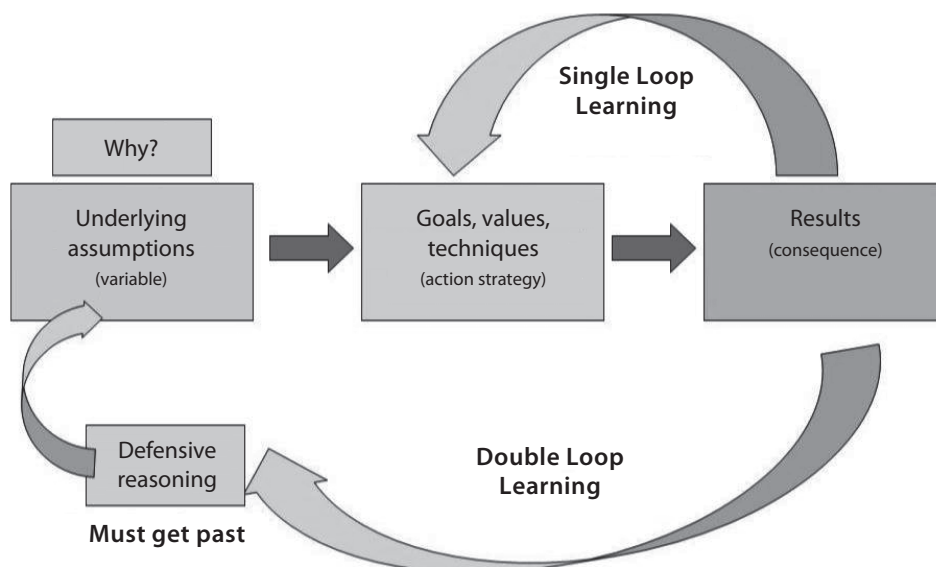
"learning organisation" has its roots in mainstream organisational thinking (*e.g.* Senge *et al.*, 1999) but has also been adapted and used widely in development contexts (*e.g.* Friedman and Meer, 2007).

Methods that can help organisations reflect on their behaviour and impact include the now widely-used Outcome Mapping (OM) methodology (Earl *et al.*, 2001). Outcome Mapping is a practical, flexible and participatory approach to planning, monitoring and evaluation. First introduced by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in 2000, Outcome Mapping has been used in projects, programmes and organisations around the world (see, for example, Box 9.6). A growing body of donor agencies, NGOs and monitoring and evaluation professionals are adopting OM because it helps them address complexity issues that other, more traditional methods do not consider.[3]

Box 9.6. Outcome Mapping: the experience of SAHA, Madagascar

SAHA is a regional development programme which seeks to empower rural people in combating poverty. The programme has been operational since 2000, but when designing its third phase (which started in 2007), the donor (SDC) had the idea of introducing Outcome Mapping to monitor activities. This decision was linked to a change in the level of intervention – from working directly with small farmer groups to partnering instead with meso-level organisations.

The experience of SAHA was that it took well over a year to familiarise staff with Outcome Mapping, and to adapt the system to programme needs. Initially the complicated jargon was off-putting, but the logic of the methodology – in terms of promoting partners to plan strategically – was appealing. Staff members are now convinced of its benefits, as illustrated by the following comment of Ony Rasoloarison, the SAHA monitoring officer:

"OM induces the empowerment of the partners, given the principle that once they have established their vision of change, they are responsible for their own development, of their area and their grassroots organisations … it's the partners who take their future in their hands, without this being imposed upon them by SAHA"…

For further information, contact Ony Rasolorison, *saha.sse@iris.mg*.

Source: Jane Carter, Intercooperation, 6 July 2010.

A recent independent evaluation of SDC's performance in empowering communities, for example, linked a participatory evaluation to an institutional learning process within SDC on how to consistently include stakeholder perspectives in its activities (Box 9.7). Organisational learning methods not only support learning but can also produce powerful stories of organisational change, as illustrated by the documentation of support for reflective change provided by the NGO *Gender at Work* to socially progressive but patriarchal organisations emerging from the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa (Friedman and Meer, 2005).

> Box 9.7. **A methodology for evaluating empowerment interventions: an independent evaluation of SDC's performance towards empowerment of stakeholders from the recipients' perspective**
>
> The evaluation was designed as an exploration of SDC's institutional ecology and its inter-institutional exchanges and prompted a process of learning within the organisation. The first step was to understand the views of SDC on issues of poverty, empowerment, participation and development in available documentation and through interviews with programme staff in headquarters (HQ) and SDC country offices (COOFs). The next step was to obtain stakeholders' perceptions on the same, and finally compare and contrast various viewpoints to arrive at an integrated understanding of the donor-recipient relationship. Data collection, which took place between June and August 2006, included review of documents, semi-structured interviews with SDC staff and partner organisation staff and extensive participatory exercises with beneficiary communities in Bolivia and Burkina Faso.
>
> The evaluation found SDC, with its plurality of organisational cultures, did not have a shared understanding of empowerment for poverty reduction, making cross-learning difficult. There was also a concern that the inclusion should be more carefully considered so that the poorest did not get left behind. SDC's focus on partnership management for empowerment on the other hand, was seen as a distinctive strength and experiences in leveraging and upscaling should be more systematically promoted.
>
> *Source:* SDC (2007), *Independent Evaluation of SDC's Performance towards Empowerment of Stakeholders from the Recipients' Perspective*, SDC, Bern.

Policy implications and recommendations

Design monitoring approaches that support a change in power relations. If monitoring and evaluating empowerment is done in a technocratic way then it is very likely that donors will contribute to disempowering people living in poverty. If donors are really results-oriented and really want to be effective they should support rigorous, but flexible approaches to monitoring and evaluating empowerment interventions and consider using approaches, including participatory methods, that contribute to (rather than undermine) empowerment. The approach proposed here accepts the complexity and unpredictability of the processes we are trying to influence and promotes the use of management tools and research methods that cope with that unpredictability, while at the same time documenting and interpreting empowering processes with quality evidence.

Use monitoring and evaluation to reflect on power relations between donors and country stakeholders. Monitoring power relations and evaluating empowerment interventions should not just focus on partners. M&E should also encourage donors, evaluators and programme staff to recognise that they themselves exercise power in their relationship with in-country partners and to reflect on the impact that they have. It should also encourage donors to recognise the limits to their power within bigger political structures and processes.

While there are already many stories and case studies concerning processes of empowerment that have been supported directly or indirectly by DAC members, there is still a tendency to downplay the role of the donors. Emphasising local ownership and not wishing to be seen to be interfering with local power structures is understandable. However, it does not accurately reflect the agency of donors. This dynamic has also meant that staff members can have little practical knowledge about optimally supporting the empowerment of people

living in poverty (Eyben, 2009). Strengthening a knowledge bank on empowerment with quality evidence from monitoring and evaluation will help staff and partners to create more effective programmes.

Link this monitoring of donor relations to an institutional process of partnership building. As discussed above, institutionalisation of monitoring in a "double loop" learning process helps donors and partners to reflect on how they use their power, clarify their respective roles and responsibilities and be more effective in their interventions. A partnership approach to M&E can support this evolving and deepening self-awareness and add to the process of changing relationships with partners.

Ensure that the need to demonstrate results is balanced against the importance of recognising context and understanding complex processes. As discussed above, indicators of empowerment can be generated, analysed and acted upon locally. They can also be mapped onto a programme or project logframe in a way which creates space in project management for identifying and understanding changes in power relations. Documentation and analysis of intended and unintended results strengthens reporting of results. A programme can be successful but not reported as such!

Champion commitment and capacity within the donor organisational hierarchies and amongst partners to use mixed methods and reflective practices in monitoring, evaluating and learning. Challenge the received wisdom within organisations on how monitoring and evaluation should be done and for whom it should be done. Support joint and partnership-based approaches to programme design and implementation, as well as M&E. Sensitise and build capacity for new empowerment monitoring, evaluating and learning approaches as part of process, including amongst programme management, evaluation units, government officials and civil society partners.

Notes

1. The Afrobarometer produces comparative measures of national public attitudes on democracy and economic conditions. For a fuller description see UNDP (2008).

2. For more information on peer ethnography visit *www.options.co.uk/te-peer-unit.htm*. For a full discussion on the adaptation of the peer ethnographic method to the Jamaican context see Hawkins (2007).

3. For more information on Outcome Mapping visit *www.idrc.ca/en/ev-26586-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html*.

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