

001  
37



LIBRARY  
OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE  
100, WHITEHALL PLACE  
LONDON, W1A 1AL  
N NW1 4NS

# Working Paper

**37**  **odi Library**  
Overseas Development Institute  
**FOR REFERENCE ONLY**

## **JUDGING SUCCESS**

### **EVALUATING NGO APPROACHES TO ALLEVIATING POVERTY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

**Roger Riddell**

**Results of ODI research presented in preliminary form  
for discussion and critical comment**

- 13: **Small Farmer Services in India: A Study of Two Blocks in Orissa State**  
*John Howell*, 1984, £5.00, ISBN 0 85003 090 0
- 15: **Macroeconomic Stabilisation, Income Distribution and Poverty: a Preliminary Survey**  
*Tony Addison and Lionel Demery*, 1985, £6.00, ISBN 0 85003 094 3
- 16: **Land Tenure Issues in Irrigation Planning Design and Management in Sub-Saharan Africa**  
*Mary Tiffen*, 1985, £3.00, ISBN 0 85003 096 X
- 17: **Balance of Payments Adjustment and Developing Countries**  
*Tony Killick*, 1985, £3.00, ISBN 0 85003 097 8
- 18: **The Third World's Import Needs and Potential: A European Perspective**,  
*Igor Karmiloff*, 1986, £6.00, ISBN 0 85003 101 X
- 20: **Colombia, 1970-85. Management and Consequences of Two Large External Shocks**  
*Juan Jose Echavarria*, 1987, £5.00, ISBN 0 85003 109 5
- 21: **Trade and Financing Strategies: A Case Study of Malaysia**  
*Mohamed Arif*, 1987, £5.00, ISBN 0 85003 108 7
- 22: **Trade and Financing Strategies for Thailand in the 1980s.**  
*Supote Chunanuntathum*, 1987, £5.00, ISBN 0 85003 110 9
- 24: **Industrialisation in Sub-Saharan Africa: Country case study: Cameroon**  
*Igor Karmiloff*, 1988, £3.00, ISBN 0 85003 112 5
- 25: **Industrialisation in Sub-Saharan Africa: Country case study: Zimbabwe**  
*Roger Riddell*, 1988, £3.00, ISBN 0 85003 113 3
- 26: **Industrialisation in Sub-Saharan Africa: Country case study: Zambia**  
*Igor Karmiloff*, 1988, £3.00, ISBN 0 85003 114 1
- 27: **European Community Trade Barriers to Tropical Agricultural Products**  
*Michael Davenport*, 24, 1988, £4.00, ISBN 0 85003 117 6
- 28: **Trade and Financing Strategies for the New NICs: the Peru Case Study**  
*Jurgen Schuldt L.*, 1988, £3.00, ISBN 0 85003 118 4
- 29: **The Control of Money Supply in Developing Countries: China, 1949-1988**  
*Anita Santorum*, 1989, £3.00, ISBN 0 85003 122 2
- 30: **Monetary Policy Effectiveness in Côte d'Ivoire**  
*Christopher E. Lane*, 1990, £3.00, ISBN 0 85003 125 7
- 31: **Economic Development and the Adaptive Economy**  
*Tony Killick*, 1990, £3.50, ISBN 0 85003 126 5
- 32: **Principles of policy for the Adaptive Economy**  
*Tony Killick*, 1990, £3.50, ISBN 0 85003 127 3
- 33: **Exchange Rates and Structural Adjustment**  
*Tony Killick*, 1990, £3.50, ISBN 0 85003 128 1
- 34: **Markets and Governments in Agricultural and Industrial Adjustment**  
*Tony Killick*, 1990, £3.50, ISBN 0 85003 129 X
- 35: **Financial Sector Policies in the Adaptive Economy**  
*Tony Killick*, 1990, £3.50, ISBN 0 85003 131 1
- 36: **Problems and limitations of adjustment policies**  
*Tony Killick*, 1990, £3.50, ISBN 0 85003 132 X
- 37: **Judging Success: Evaluating NGO Income-Generating Projects**  
*Roger Riddell*, 1990, £3.50, ISBN 0 85003 133 8
- 38: **ACP Export Diversification: Non-Traditional Exports from Zimbabwe**  
*Roger Riddell*, 1990, £3.50, ISBN 0 85003 134 6
- 39: **Monetary Policy in Kenya, 1967-88**  
*Tony Killick and F. M. Mwega*, 1990, £3.50, ISBN 0 85003 135 4
- 40: **ACP Export Diversification: Jamaica, Kenya and Ethiopia**  
*Christopher Stevens*, 1990, £3.50, ISBN 0 85003 136 2
- 41: **ACP Export Diversification: The Case of Mauritius**  
*Matthew McQueen*, 1990, £3.50, ISBN 0 85003 137 0
- 42: **An Econometric Study of Selected Monetary Policy Issues in Kenya**  
*F. M. Mwega*, 1990, £3.50, ISBN 0 85003 142 7
- 43: **Differences in Economic Performance between Franc Zone and other sub-Saharan African Countries**  
*Christopher E. Lane and Sheila Page*, 1991, £3.50, ISBN 0 85003 148 6
- 44: **Monetary Policy Effectiveness in Indonesia, 1974-1900**  
*Christopher E. Lane, David C. Cole and Betty F. Slade*, 1991, £3.50, ISBN 0 85003 150 8

**WORKING PAPER 37**

**JUDGING SUCCESS**

**EVALUATING NGO APPROACHES  
TO ALLEVIATING POVERTY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

**Roger Riddell**

**May 1990**

**ISBN 0-85003-133-8**

**OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE  
Regent's College  
Inner Circle, Regent's Park  
LONDON NW1 4NS**

### **Acknowledgements**

ODI Working Papers present in preliminary form work resulting from research undertaken under the auspices of the Institute. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the ODI. Comments are welcomed and should be sent directly to the author.

## Preface

This Working Paper is the first (preliminary) outcome of a major ODI research project evaluating the effectiveness of projects of non-government organisations (NGOs) in raising the economic status of the poor in four countries: Bangladesh, India, Uganda and Zimbabwe. It attempts to provide a framework for detailed evaluations of some 16 different projects funded, and some cases run, by British NGOs in these four countries. The studies are being undertaken during 1990.

In drawing up this Paper on evaluation, the author has tried to outline an approach which is both loose enough to allow country and project specific characteristics to be preserved, but detailed enough to allow some sort of cross-country conclusions to be made. The details will thus differ both from country to country and from project to project. The approach is based on the assumption that it is essential to incorporate a range of non-economic elements, relevant to the projects and the communities participating in these projects, in the overall evaluation. It is also drawn up with the knowledge that only rarely do NGO projects funded by British NGOs have base-line data of a quality sufficient for rigorous quantitative comparisons of changes in income, consumption or assets to be made.

The Paper is likely to be revised and re-ordered as a result of the experience gained in the field evaluations. Thereafter it is hoped that if the evaluation process used here has proved useful to NGOs, it could provide at least a framework for a more general approach to similar evaluations. However even at this stage, comments would be most welcome and should be addressed directly to the author.

In its present form the Paper has benefited from detailed comments from a number of people including John de Coninck, Adrian Hewitt, John Howell, Ann Muir, Paul Spray, Mark Robinson and Sarah White.

The overall NGO project is being financed from a number of sources including the Evaluation Department and the Economic and Social Committee for Research (ESCOR) of the Overseas Development Administration (ODA), the Leverhulme Trust, Barclays Bank, and five of the larger British NGOs working in the development field.

## CONTENTS

	Page
<b>I. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. DOUBTS, CONCERNS AND FEARS</b>	<b>4</b>
II. 1 Problems and Gaps in Evaluation of Official Aid	4
II. 2 Evaluation of NGO Projects and Programmes and Grounds for Caution	5
II. 3 Reasons for Change	9
II. 4 The Way Ahead?	11
<b>III. TOWARDS AN APPROACH TO EVALUATING NGO POVERTY ALLEVIATING PROJECTS AND PROGRAMMES</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>IV. JUDGING SUCCESS OF POVERTY ALLEVIATING PROJECTS OF NGOS</b>	<b>16</b>
IV.1 Introduction	16
IV.2 Preliminary Project Familiarisation	19
IV.3 Initial Visit to Project and Environs	19
IV.4 Drawing Initial Conclusions and Data-Gap Identification	20
IV.5 Gathering Further Information	23
IV.6 Refining Conclusions and Writing Up	26
<b>V. CHECK-LIST OF QUESTIONS AND APPROACHES FOR DISCRETE NGO PROJECT EVALUATIONS</b>	<b>28</b>
V. 1 Introduction	28
V. 2 Gender Issues	29
V. 3 Overall Assessment of a Project	30
V. 4 Evaluating Benefits	31
V. 5 Project Costs	36
V. 6 Marrying Costs and Benefits	40
V. 7 Replication and Sustainability	42
<b>VI. THE COUNTRY ASSESSMENT</b>	<b>46</b>
VI.1 General Objectives	47
VI.2 Check-List of Specific Questions to Raise or Data to Look For	49
VI.3 Conclusions	53
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>54</b>

## I. INTRODUCTION

Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) which devote their attention to developing countries - Oxfam, Christian Aid, ActionAid, Cafod, the Save the Children Fund and scores of smaller NGOs - are now household names in Britain, as are their counterparts in other industrial countries. As their name suggests, over 70% of NGO income comes from the voluntary contributions of individuals, and this support is based firmly on the belief that these organisations have a positive, and many would argue a significant, impact in helping the millions of poor people inhabiting the globe, especially those living in Africa and Asia. Not surprisingly, therefore, the *raison d'être* of these NGOs is, at its broadest, to work for the alleviation and eventual elimination of poverty and distress in developing countries. One of the oldest NGOs which is today concerned with developing country problems is the Save the Children Fund: it was launched in London in May 1919. The biggest British NGO, in terms of income, is Oxfam, which was started in 1942. As its original name - the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief - suggests, it was established to assist when emergencies struck.<sup>1</sup>

Providing help to the victims of emergencies - in famine, earthquake, flood or hurricane - remains an important part of Oxfam's activities today as with the work of most of the major NGOs, but it is by no means their only concern. A clear distinction is now commonly made between their relief and emergency work on the one hand and their development work on the other, while it is also widely agreed that the best way to alleviate and, hopefully, eliminate poverty is to promote the long-term development of the poor - one of the beneficial effects of which is to reduce vulnerability to emergencies and disasters. As a result, to the extent that the pressures to respond to the immediate problems of emergencies permit, most NGOs devote as many resources as they can to promoting long term development.<sup>2</sup>

Working to alleviate poverty through the promotion of long term development is itself a far from simple task: NGOs and development specialists alike acknowledge that a range of different factors either inhibit or assist the development process. A useful distinction is frequently made, however, between policies and institutions within countries which have a bearing (positive or negative) on development and poverty alleviation, and policies and institutions located *outside* particular countries. External factors, principally those concerning aid and trade issues, are themselves determined by decisions taken in and between the richer industrialised countries.

Not surprisingly, this distinction between internal and external factors has influenced the manner in which NGOs approach long term development and poverty alleviation

---

<sup>1</sup> It began its work in Greece, and only later shifted its emphasis principally to developing countries.

<sup>2</sup> Some, however, like the British Red Cross Society or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), are still predominantly oriented to responding to emergencies.

in developing countries. Part of the NGO effort, in Britain as in other industrial countries, is devoted to addressing directly the problems of poverty within developing countries, part is channelled into attempts to influence Britain's (and now the European Community's (EC's)) relevant trade and aid policies. This is done by campaigning, lobbying and increasing public awareness of these external factors through what is termed 'development education'. Since the mid-1960s, this particular aspect of NGO work has become more prominent; indeed some NGOs, such as the World Development Movement and the Centre for World Development Education, were set up to devote themselves exclusively to this aspect of the overall development effort. On the other hand, many NGOs, particularly the smaller ones, devote none or very few of their resources to addressing this aspect of the development problem, sometimes because they consider it to be of less importance than helping to promote development within developing countries, in part as a result of discussion with their particular funders and donors.<sup>3</sup>

Work in the spheres of immediate emergency relief and influencing external policy is thus an important element of the overall activities of most, and all the larger, NGOs. Hence assessment of these activities would need to be incorporated into any comprehensive judgement of the performance and success of NGOs.

The focus of this Working Paper, however, is narrower. It is framed exclusively within the context of that part of NGO work directed at alleviating poverty and promoting development through intervention *within* developing countries, and characterised, typically, by financial and technical support for socio-economic projects and programmes. Its purpose is to attempt to judge the extent to which NGO efforts in this sphere of activity are successful in helping to alleviate poverty. In other words, to assess their impact. It does this in two ways: firstly by outlining a framework for evaluating in some detail *one particular type* of project undertaken by NGOs, income-generating projects, and secondly by outlining the factors which need to be considered to place this micro-analysis into the wider context.

The rest of the Paper is broken down as follows. Section II provides a backdrop to the more technical sections which follow by raising some of the issues which help to illustrate why many British NGOs have tended not to introduce a more widespread and institutionalised policy towards evaluation of their projects, pointing out recent pressures for change, and ending by pointing to a way forward, sensitive to the legitimate concerns of NGOs. Section III outlines, briefly, some of the principles and assumptions which are incorporated into the approach to project and programme evaluation considered in this Paper. Section IV provides a detailed approach to the evaluation of discrete NGO income-generating projects, complemented by Section V which provides a check-list of issues, techniques and questions to assist, where appropriate, the gathering of data required in the evaluation of discrete NGO projects.

---

<sup>3</sup> There are also limits to the manner in which NGOs with charitable status (the vast majority) are permitted under the law to campaign and influence political decisions. For further discussion of this point see Robinson [1990].

Section VI, The Country Assessment, contains a check-list of factors and influences which, it is argued, are necessary to judge the success of particular attempts to alleviate poverty in the framework of the wider problems of poverty and other attempts to address them, at the regional and national level.

## II. DOUBTS, CONCERNS AND FEARS

At the best of times, and in the best of circumstances, evaluation is a delicate and difficult enterprise. This is not simply because evaluations attempt to assess the worth of things done (or not done) and to suggest ways in which they might be done either better or differently, but because (whether directly or indirectly) the conclusions drawn have a bearing on the work done by individuals and/or the organisations for which they work. What is more, the very nature of evaluation can frequently create tension between evaluator and the project itself. Thus, even if constructively and sympathetically executed, evaluations are often of greatest benefit or interest when they indicate how processes, methods or objectives should or might differ from present practice. Yet such conclusions are precisely those which raise questions about the performance of people and/or institutions responsible for what has been or is currently being done.

Institutional concern with (or, sometimes, fear of) the evaluation process is significantly reduced when the decision to evaluate is taken internally by the institution whose projects are being evaluated and is supported by staff from top to bottom; when evaluations are undertaken by people either from within the organisation or employed by it; when the results and conclusions are carefully controlled; and when individuals responsible for the projects under evaluation do not feel their jobs, institutions, or public image will be threatened.

Besides these more general concerns there are others, more directly related to aid evaluation, which need to be highlighted. The particular problems of evaluating the development efforts of NGOs can be appreciated first by drawing attention to the difficulties encountered in official aid evaluations, where there is now a history of evaluating projects over a period of 10 to 15 years, and where evaluations are now carried out routinely by all bilateral agencies, including the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA).

### II.1 Problems and Gaps in Evaluation of Official Aid

Although advances have certainly been made in evaluation of official aid, there are still large gaps and uncertainties over method, interpretation and timing of evaluations. In particular, attention can be drawn to the following points.

- There is no agreed methodology of evaluation either across different sectors or of particular types of aid interventions. What is more, while there *is* agreement that evaluations should attempt to judge results against objectives, it is not uncommon in aid interventions for subsequent events to suggest that the objectives initially set might need to be altered, creating an even less firm foundation for deriving durable conclusions. Another problem is that while a literature has been building up of

experience in evaluating official aid *projects*, increasing amounts of official aid are now channelled as *programme aid* - for which there is even less certainty over approaches to evaluation.

- Official aid evaluations tend to be dominated by methods that encompass some sort of cost-benefit analysis. But there is doubt about both the appropriateness of using and the reliability of traditional or orthodox methods for an increasing proportion of official aid projects. Particular attention needs to be drawn to two issues. First, even when base-line studies have been carried out and when control data are available, the techniques of more narrow cost-benefit analysis produce far from consistent results. This arises in part because there is no *a priori* way of knowing when to evaluate particular aid interventions (and the results can vary quite markedly over time) and in part because when re-evaluations take place they reveal a high degree of error in the 'fixed' quantitative data available. Second, while there is now widespread agreement that non-quantifiable as well as a range of indirect factors need to be incorporated into an overall evaluation, no agreed or reliable method has yet been found of judging which of these factors need to be assessed, how their impact can be accurately ascertained, or how their influence ought to be integrated with the quantitative data obtained during the evaluation.
  
- It is not possible to use the results of evaluations of official aid to 'conclude as a demonstrable fact' either that this aid helps the development process and the relief of poverty or that it does not - although it is possible to have 'a well-educated assessment' as a result of in-depth and specific country studies.<sup>4</sup> In part this arises because only a fraction of all official aid - probably less than 15% [Riddell, 1987:185ff] - has ever been evaluated, and in part it is due to the fact that official aid performance is influenced significantly by a range of other external factors.

## II.2 Evaluation of NGO Projects and Programmes and Grounds for Caution

For most British development-oriented NGOs evaluation is still very new. The vast majority of projects and programmes funded by British NGOs in developing countries are not subject to any sort of formal evaluation, and they are not bound to specified cycles of expenditure for committed support, as is common for official aid projects. The majority of NGOs do not carry out *any* evaluations beyond normal office

---

<sup>4</sup> These quotations are taken from Cassen [1986], the most significant source cited to argue that official aid does 'work'. See also the more recent work of Krueger *et al.* [1989].

procedures of project report-back and financial audit.<sup>5</sup> Evaluation is probably most advanced within Oxfam, the biggest British NGO, which has a separate unit for research and evaluation, and Christian Aid. But even here, no common framework, guidelines or procedures for evaluating projects or programmes have yet been adopted.<sup>6</sup> While Oxfam, Christian Aid and most of the larger NGOs have carried out or commissioned evaluations of particular projects (usually their bigger ones) there has been no uniformity of method, and in almost all cases the results have remained confidential to the organisation. In short, evaluation has tended to be discrete and mostly marginal to the cycle of project proposal and acceptance.

Neither the general concerns about evaluations - especially about evaluations conducted by external agencies - nor the problems and uncertainties of evaluation methods and approaches used by official aid agencies instills confidence among British NGOs that they should alter present practice, expand or initiate a systematic approach to the evaluation of their own activities in developing countries. There are, however, other and good reasons why so little advance has been made by NGOs in evaluating their development effort in developing countries and why there is some reluctance to adopt evaluation techniques and methods in a more sustained manner.

The first is that there has been little demand for evaluation among those who support the work of the development NGOs. External pressure on governments, especially from free market critics, to show the effectiveness of *their* (official) aid programmes, and to convince their legislatures that this allocation of public funds was being well-spent became influential in the second half of the 1970s. It certainly had an impact upon the decision to institutionalise and pay greater attention to evaluation.<sup>7</sup> Similar external pressures have not been effectively applied to NGOs.<sup>8</sup> If donations are a guide to support and an indication of approval of methods, then the 1980s could be judged a period when the public re-affirmed its faith in the ability of British NGOs to achieve their objectives. Furthermore, critics of official aid, from both right and left, have been amongst those advocating increased support for NGOs.

There have, too, been fewer pressures from the NGO movement as a whole or from within individual NGOs to adopt a more formal approach to or more general advocacy of evaluation. One reason is that the staff of NGOs, from their directors downwards, are typically fully-stretched, often working overtime, so that there is no spare capacity within most NGOs to devote to such activities. If additional staff are taken on, this

<sup>5</sup> Not all British NGOs have formalised even these procedures for all of their interventions in developing countries.

<sup>6</sup> There is, however, often a demand even from within NGOs for such methods or procedures to be adopted, as is apparent from documentation circulated within particular NGOs.

<sup>7</sup> Even if, as argued elsewhere [Riddell, 1987], the results of project and programme evaluations cannot answer directly the general question: does aid work?

<sup>8</sup> Although, as Campbell [1989] points out, the pressures are not entirely absent.

is usually in response to an expansion of project work.<sup>9</sup> Continued pressures to keep costs low discourage all but the major four or five NGOs from either employing staff to work on evaluation or incurring significant additional costs in employing outside evaluators.

It is certainly true that as NGOs grow accounting procedures tend to be tightened and become more institutionalised; yet generally this has not yet led to a more formalised system of evaluating how well the money is being spent in relation to either the broad objectives of the NGOs or the more immediate objectives of the particular projects or programmes supported in the developing countries. There are a number of important reasons for this which can be briefly summarised.

- NGO projects and programmes are characterised by a much greater variety of purpose and process than are projects and programmes of official agencies. They are also much smaller in terms of cost, size and numbers of beneficiaries. These factors tend to reinforce a view that each intervention is unique, or nearly so, thereby down-playing any potential lessons that might be learnt for future interventions. This reduces the benefits that it is assumed might be derived from evaluation studies.
- NGOs pride themselves on being particularly sensitive to the needs of the poor in developing countries and on responding quickly to these. This, together with extreme pressures on staff time to shorten the pre-project assessment or feasibility period, and to keep costs down, means that the objectives of projects or programmes are frequently couched in terms which are rather general, or which are altered, often substantially, during the life of the project or programme. The more imprecise the objectives, the harder it is to provide an evaluation with clear-cut conclusions. This also reduces the benefits (for future interventions) that it is assumed might be derived from evaluation studies.
- What NGO personnel know of evaluation methods and techniques tends to reinforce beliefs about the inappropriateness of applying these to the interventions of their own agency. While the failure of evaluation techniques applied to official aid projects successfully to blend together qualitative and quantitative data is an important factor here, the problems are more fundamental.

Firstly, as NGO projects and programmes are rarely undertaken with the benefits of a pre-feasibility study, any sort of base-line study or any

---

<sup>9</sup> Although in the larger agencies, as noted above, it has also been related to the felt-need to direct more resources to campaigning and development education work in Britain.

monitoring of a control group<sup>10</sup>, there is little faith that the quantitative data obtained from an evaluation would be adequate to arrive at firm conclusions even about the economic effects of NGO projects or programmes. More importantly, however, almost all NGOs share an understanding of the development process far wider than simply the provision or acquisition of goods, services or the means of production. They subscribe to the view that raising the living standards of the poor in a sustainable manner necessitates the poor acquiring more *power*, for example through community organisation and non-formal education, with some NGOs going so far as to equate 'development' totally with 'empowerment'. Even if their view of development is to be found only part-way along this spectrum (that is they believe development is achieved in part by promoting the self-reliance of the poor through a mix of power, physical and technical resources), they are led to dismiss as largely irrelevant mainstream social cost-benefit analysis, with its apparent bias towards quantitative measurement and its perceived under-playing of the role of non-quantifiable and non-economic elements.

- Two particular and more recent trends are also of importance. One is that it is becoming increasingly rare for British NGOs to manage and execute their own projects and programmes on their own in developing countries: most common is for British NGOs to provide resources to selected southern NGOs to assist them in promoting projects or programmes which they have drawn up and wish to execute. Thus, Christian Aid and Cafod channel *most* of their funds to their overseas 'partners' rather than promoting their own projects from Britain, while Oxfam, too, has minimised its direct intervention in a number of countries. This development throws at least some doubt on the appropriateness of British NGOs' evaluating projects and programmes which are not 'theirs' and for which they do not have direct responsibility - even if it raises the question about the extent to which these 'partners' have been, or ought to be, evaluated when significant funds are given to them.

The related question is raised: evaluation for whom? Recent experience in participatory evaluation indicates that the view of the intervention by the supposed beneficiaries can and often does differ significantly from that of the donor. Thus, to the extent that it is initiated by the northern donor in a manner which attempts to provide a framework whose consistency is donor-based, the likelihood of the process of evaluation 'missing target' is increased.

---

<sup>10</sup> Note that this and most comments in this Paper refer solely to *British* NGO intervention.

- Finally (although it is not frequently raised as an issue in this context), there is also a fear that more evaluations will provide evidence that a number - and possibly quite a significant proportion - of NGO interventions *do* fail to meet the objectives of alleviating the poverty of the beneficiaries, or may find that beneficiaries are not the poorest after all. More evidence increases the risks both that knowledge of such failures will become more widespread and that such knowledge could be used malevolently. The immediate concern is that this might lead to voluntary income from supporters being adversely affected, perhaps dramatically so, or at least that those supporting development NGOs will be more choosy and switch their financial allegiance to NGOs having what they believe is a better record of success.

These concerns are far from academic. Even without a representative sample of evaluations of NGO projects, what we know already would tend to suggest that the failure rate is likely to be far from insignificant. Two factors are of relevance here. First, overall evidence from official aid projects indicates that at least 10% could be deemed a 'failure' [Cassen, 1986:11-12], while more detailed country-based analysis gives figures of upwards of 15% [see FRG, 1986]. Second, the points already made about pressures which NGOs face to keep costs low, to respond quickly to requests for assistance and the often rather general objectives of a number of their projects would tend to suggest that the general environment in which NGOs operate is probably less favourable than it is for achieving success through official aid interventions. Far more NGO than official aid projects and programmes tend to be targeted directly to the poor. Yet data on poverty alleviation in developing countries indicate how difficult it is to achieve sustainable improvements in living standards in short periods of time, while poverty-targeted projects of official agencies have a far lower success rate than do their other projects [see Cassen 1986:11]. In other words, one would not *expect* NGO projects to achieve their objectives as easily as one would most official aid projects. Indeed a recent report on the impact of Danish NGOs [Danida, 1989:4], is in part based on the assumption that NGOs tend to become involved in areas that are controversial.

### II.3 Reasons for Change

All these different factors provide reasons against NGOs' departing radically from current practice and initiating a new and different, possibly expensive and potentially disruptive, system of evaluation. The subsequent sections of this Paper, describing how evaluation methods might be used more extensively by NGOs, are based on the assumption that there *is* a case to be made for altering present practice. Here, the main reasons for this assumption are outlined.

One of the major motives for altering present practice lies in the fact that the 'world' of development NGOs is changing. One element is the increasingly close relationship that has been developing between NGOs and the ODA (and with the EC), highlighted

by the expansion of funds official agencies have channelled to NGOs to support their development activities in the developing countries. In 1988 this amounted to some £64 million in total. In 1989 ODA allocated £16 million to NGOs' long term development projects under the Joint Funding Scheme, and it is expected that this will rise to £20 million in 1990 [Chalker 1989].<sup>11</sup>

The more significant the allocation of public funds to NGOs, the greater the pressure for the ODA to be able to defend its allocation of these funds to parliament (and to ODA's critics). If the provision of public money to NGOs were exclusively on a project-by-project basis, evidence of the success of these projects could be expected as a condition at least of *further* funding. However, as some public money is provided on a block grant basis, there are pressures for NGOs to provide more general evidence of overall achievement.

Greater amounts of public money channelled to development NGOs, growing incomes from individual sources and a greater public attention given to development NGOs (derived in part from increased resources going to development education in Britain and in part from the public response to famines in Africa) have all combined to raise the profile of NGOs as agencies which *do* help the poor and work to alleviate poverty through working for long term development. Thus not only is government putting pressure on NGOs to 'prove' their effectiveness, but the public is increasingly concerned to know that NGOs effectively and efficiently achieve their objectives. This concern has been stimulated in part by the publicity put out by the NGOs themselves, especially by the critical questioning of aid their literature encourages. What is more, one interpretation given to the creation of Band Aid was that the NGOs already in existence were not able adequately and sufficiently to work for famine relief and poverty alleviation in Africa. As the British Minister for Overseas Development, Mrs Chalker, has argued [1989]:

*Honesty about the standard of all aid work is essential, Not all NGOs are in fact good at grassroots development. Not all NGOs are cost-effective. Some spend a great deal on glossy public relations and awards which have little to do with the needs of the poor. And there are, I fear, rather too many who are readier to be unhelpfully critical of each other or of our ODA programme than to look honestly at their own failings.*<sup>12</sup>

This higher public profile creates a slightly different sort of pressure on NGOs than that originating from their government funders. The government needs to satisfy *itself*

<sup>11</sup> In European terms this percentage share of funds originating from the government would appear to be low. In Sweden, Norway and Denmark more than 60% of funds originate from the government, sometimes rising as high as 80%. [See, for instance, Danida, 1989].

<sup>12</sup> Brodhead *et al.* put it thus [1988:45]:

*NGOs must avoid the assumption that good motives necessarily lead to right actions; altruism is not an end in itself.*

that the money it allocates to development NGOs is money well spent; it can do this by funding assessments and evaluations of NGOs and their projects which can remain *outside* the public domain. The higher public profile of NGOs, however, must eventually lead to greater public assurances that NGOs are effective in alleviating poverty in developing countries. Not only will this lead to greater demands for 'proof', but it may well lead supporters to question the extent to which such a wide range and variety of NGOs is *necessary*. There is no reason to suppose either that the lack of co-ordination apparent in official aid circles is absent among NGOs or that there is no duplication of efforts between different NGOs or between NGOs and official aid agencies.

But there are other, perhaps stronger, factors involved too. Many NGOs now feel they are being pulled (sometimes against their traditional instincts) into having to answer key questions about their involvement in longer-term and integrated development rather than short-term and discrete projects, and, more generally still, about the appropriateness of their very involvement in particular countries. As these questions are raised within different organisations, it is increasingly recognised that - more often than not - development work is complex, difficult and perhaps even disillusioning.

#### II.4 The Way Ahead?

Any democratic organisation accountable to its supporters and dependent upon voluntary contributions for its sustenance attempts to achieve the goals for which it exists as effectively and efficiently, and in as open a manner, as possible. British NGOs working in the development field are no exception, indeed both they and their supporters would rate them highly in relation to all these goals. At their best, evaluation techniques should be able to assess performance results against objectives, benefits against costs, and in so doing identify strengths and weaknesses in a way which can have an impact on efficiency and effectiveness of projects and programmes. They can also be used to highlight weaknesses in monitoring particular actions as well as providing a wider perspective on groups of projects or programmes - either, in the case of NGOs, in relation to particular countries or in relation to different types of intervention.<sup>13</sup>

It would appear, therefore, that the main worry is not so much doubt about the *theoretical* merits of introducing a system to help achieve objectives more effectively and efficiently, but rather about the likelihood of these objectives being attained in practice, especially when judged against both the costs and adverse consequences (internally and externally) which might also result. This perspective is also borne out by the fact that some of the larger NGOs are evaluating their projects and some, through the studies they have undertaken in different developing countries, have begun to assess the wider impact of their interventions in relation to broader issues of

---

<sup>13</sup>

A number of these terms are derived directly from Feuerstein [1986:2].

development. That NGOs have contracted external evaluators to examine some of their (larger) projects and that they are continuing to contract them to do so suggests, at minimum, that these exercises are deemed useful to these organisations.

The more pressing issues for NGOs are therefore the extent to which those NGOs which *are* evaluating their development efforts should expand their efforts in this field, especially by using a more systematic approach, and whether more of the smaller NGOs should follow the lead of their larger northern partners.<sup>14</sup> These raise other, more detailed, questions. Should evaluations continue to be one-off affairs related to addressing particular questions (for instance, to ensure that funds allocated to large single projects are well spent, or to understand why particular projects went so badly wrong or why a particular sort appear to be achieving such limited results) or could the process of evaluation, or monitoring and evaluation, be extended and incorporated more permanently into the project cycle and country strategy? Is it possible for larger organisations to extend, and for smaller NGOs to initiate, an approach to evaluation which can provide reasonably clear indications not only of success or failure but of reasons for varying performance? Can such an approach be adopted without having to use excessive amounts of money, time or human resources and, relatedly, could this be undertaken without employing external experts but be possibly undertaken by staff of the NGO itself?

It is unlikely that these questions can be answered from the armchair. First it is necessary to outline an approach to NGO evaluation which addresses these questions and concerns, and second this approach needs to be tested in the field.

---

<sup>14</sup> Some of the smaller NGOs have already started to adopt a more systematic approach to monitoring and evaluation, with base-line surveys and regular evaluations.

### III. TOWARDS AN APPROACH TO EVALUATING NGO POVERTY ALLEVIATING PROJECTS AND PROGRAMMES

This section outlines the major elements of an approach which is to be used to help judge the effectiveness of NGOs in poverty alleviating projects in developing countries, to be used, initially, by ODI in Bangladesh, India, Uganda and Zimbabwe during the course of 1990. It begins by outlining the set of assumptions upon which the approach is based.

The aim is to devise an approach to assessing not *all* NGO projects and programmes but, more narrowly, those whose purpose is to alleviate the poverty / improve the living conditions of the beneficiaries, principally of people living in non-metropolitan areas. Thus, projects and programmes which are focused on emergencies would be excluded, as would those aimed *principally* at welfare-enhancing objectives.<sup>15</sup>

Projects and programmes directed at poverty alleviation embrace two types of intervention, one direct and the other indirect. The first covers those projects and programmes whose objectives would include (but not necessarily be restricted to) raising income levels or enhancing the economic status of beneficiaries. The second type would cover projects and programmes whose *immediate* aim was to motivate and organise the poor, increasing the self-reliance of the beneficiaries in the wider community in order (thereby and in the longer term<sup>16</sup>) to improve their material well-being by raising incomes or enhancing wealth.

There is, of course, nothing either new or original in attempting to assess projects and programmes in developing countries aimed at alleviating poverty or raising the income of beneficiaries. With few restrictions on time, resources and specialist skills, it would not be difficult (although not always easy) to undertake evaluations of these sorts of projects and programmes (big or small), form a judgement of their overall merits and indicate changes which would improve effectiveness and efficiency.

One reason for looking for a *different* approach is that almost no NGO has the resources, time and skills to undertake these sorts of evaluations on a regular basis, even if some do pay for a few in-depth evaluations to be carried out. Additionally (as noted above), most NGOs remain resistant to adopting wholesale an approach close to that used by official agencies which they see as dominated by quantitative statistical techniques. Perhaps of more importance, the complexity of rural societies and the difficulties of alleviating poverty point to the need to approach the evaluation of these

---

<sup>15</sup> These are set aside in the present exercise not because they are judged unimportant but because a common sectoral focus may offer a better basis for making comparisons of NGO intervention in different contexts.

<sup>16</sup> Examples might be through gaining access to resources previously denied a particular (poor) group, unavailable to them, or of which they were ignorant. It could also involve efforts to reduce dependence (economic and otherwise) on traditional patrons.

particular projects from the 'underside', that is from the viewpoint of the socio-economic (and ideally the historical) context of the communities into which the particular project is inserted.

The challenge, therefore, is to design a method of evaluating the impact of what are complex NGO projects and programmes on the basis of limited time, limited financial resources and limited skills, and in a manner which is able to incorporate qualitative indicators of performance into the assessment. But it is even more demanding than this because of the paucity of quantitative data available: most British-funded and British-run NGO projects and programmes typically have no quantitative base-line data against which to judge effects and outcome, while the data on project effects, costs and benefits tend also to be far from complete and comprehensive.

These circumstances and conditions provide an inauspicious context for serious evaluation. In particular, professionals trained in economic techniques and evaluators skilled in cost-benefit analysis and in constructing quantitative rates of return and net present value estimates for projects might well argue that there is little here to inspire confidence. How, it can be asked, can firm conclusions be made when there is not enough time and not sufficient skills to gather the data, not enough data to be gathered, and therefore when assessment is so dominated by subjectivity? These ingredients would appear to be a recipe for sloppiness of approach and inconclusiveness of outcome.

But, equally, it has to be asked whether it is necessary to make use of these sophisticated, time-consuming and expensive tools of analysis. Gaps in resources, technique and data become a serious problem only if the conclusions drawn are controversial, if they are challenged and if they need to be defended against opposing views and conclusions; it is only here that the struggle for objectivity and the elimination of personal bias becomes paramount. Similarly, there is no point in spending time and resources gathering very detailed quantitative data to show that income levels have risen from, say, \$4.30 a month to \$6.50 at fixed prices, if the *purpose* of the evaluation is merely to discover *if* incomes rise significantly and to list, in order of importance (rather than put an accurate figure on), the factors contributing to the increase in income. If the conclusions derived from evaluations are clear and are accepted by the different interested groups as a reflection of reality, then techniques used to arrive at these judgements become far less important. 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 - the beneficiaries, the NGO donor and the recipient government - then purist worries about objectively assessing these factors become largely irrelevant.

This perspective provides the entry point for the approach to NGO evaluation outlined here. The *primary* objective - in common with 'conventional' evaluations - is to make judgements about the project or programme under investigation: whether, overall, it

could be deemed successful; how, in moving to the details of the evaluation, it could be made more efficient or effective; whether it has made an appreciable impact on alleviating the poverty of a particular community or group of people; and (if relevant) what the potential is for replication.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> All these different elements are important and how to assess each will be discussed in more detail below. As Chambers argues [in Cernea, 1985:399], '*decision-makers need information that is relevant, timely, accurate and usable; ... a great deal of information that is generated is in various combinations irrelevant, late, wrong or unusable anyway*'.

#### IV. JUDGING SUCCESS OF POVERTY ALLEVIATING PROJECTS OF NGOs

##### IV.1 Introduction

Methods of evaluation can only 'come alive' when they are unravelled to answer specific questions. In this approach to assessing discrete NGO projects, the purpose is to attempt to provide answers to seven key (and inter-related) questions, the first of which, although the most fundamental, is likely to be answered last.

(1) **Has the project been successful in achieving its objectives?**<sup>18</sup>

In answering this question, a number of issues need to be addressed: what were the project objectives, when were the results expected, what assumptions were made the project and the wider environment, what lessons from 'elsewhere' were incorporated into the project?

- (2) **Has the overall economic status of the intended beneficiaries been enhanced following the NGO intervention; that is, has the project had an impact in addressing the problems of poverty? What are the different factors which led to the impact achieved and which (specify) are judged to be more and which less important?**
- (3) **Have the benefits of the project been distributed equitably between different groups of people - richer, poorer, men and women, landed and landless?**
- (4) **Has the change in economic status of the beneficiaries been due more to the impact of the project than to the influence of other non-project factors, or *vice versa*?**
- (5) **Has the project been executed efficiently - that is, were the costs appropriate to the range, level and distribution of benefits?**
- (6) **Do the results of the project provide grounds for believing that this type of intervention can be replicated so that the benefits can be spread more widely? Specify these.**
- (7) (a) **If the NGO is still involved in the project, is a date set for withdrawal and is withdrawal likely to lead to any particular problems?**
- (b) **If the NGO has already withdrawn, did this lead to any particular problems? In general, what are the prospects for project sustainability?**

---

<sup>18</sup> Initially one assumes that performance is to be judged against original objectives, but in some cases it is judged against evolving or changed objectives.

Answers to these questions do not simply 'appear' through following a prescribed method of approach. They do not come from out of the blue, nor, importantly, from simply reading descriptions and narratives or adding up numbers about projects and listening to what people appearing in front of one have to say about it. In particular they are vulnerable to bias.<sup>19</sup> Answers and an increase in knowledge emerge and are derived from a dynamic process of further and searching questioning based on judgements evolving from the interaction of the evaluator with the 'world' of the project - the world of people and their opinions as well as the material world. The list of these underlying questions is potentially infinite in variety, dependent, *inter alia*, upon the particular history and characteristics of different projects, the particular history and characteristics of the NGO and, last but by no means least, the particular history, personality and training of the individual evaluators. Thus evaluations consist of far more than merely gathering pre-established pieces of information and, in the case of projects which have complex social and other non-economic components, far more than collecting and organising quantitative data.

It is one thing, however, to be wary of gathering data which are not ordered within a particular (albeit flexible) framework. It is another to argue that obtaining facts and data and opinions - in short information-seeking - is wholly irrelevant. Evaluation methods - of NGO projects or of any other human enterprise - consist (or ought to consist) of a dynamic process of information-seeking and judgement, with the quality of the final product dependent upon a mix of the two.

The raising of these particular issues and the nature of evaluating NGO projects aimed at alleviating poverty lead to two further considerations. The first relates to what was referred to above as evaluation from the 'underside'. To be sensitive to the complexity of issues surrounding not only the project but, more importantly, the society into which the project has been inserted, requires special skills. These include a sensitivity to the community, gained most probably through past experience of undertaking these sorts of evaluation. Academic skills helpful in this context are clearly far broader than technical training in economics and quantitative cost-benefit techniques. They would likely embrace other fields of development, not least anthropological skills.<sup>20</sup>

This leads on to the second consideration: the blending of technical skills in evaluation methods and approaches with specific knowledge of particular projects or particular communities. There are two extremes which need to be noted. On the one hand,

---

<sup>19</sup> 'Any investigation can be easily distorted by bias. Early on, an investigator develops a view about his case. From then on the facts must fit that view: he sees what he wants to see and edits out what does not fit.' Sarah Helm, writing in The Independent, 6 November 1989, in comments about police investigations into the case of 'the Guildford Four'.

<sup>20</sup> As Widstrand has commented recently [1990:6]:

*What anthropology has to offer, uniquely, is a range of models and theories dealing with the most important issues in development work: the interplay of social, economic and technical factors in human communities undergoing change. Anthropology has made a speciality of the pragmatic study of change in small-scale societies.*

it is well-nigh impossible to undertake a sound evaluation of a project with no knowledge of the language and culture of the beneficiaries. On the other hand, giving a prominent role in evaluations to someone with knowledge of the language and culture but who additionally might be either one of the beneficiaries or a member of the NGO sponsoring the project is likely to colour the process of gaining knowledge about the project and answering the seven key questions.

One way of addressing this range of problems is to make use of an evaluation team or a joint evaluation approach, which maximises the talents and skills required and minimises the potential biases of particular individuals. For most of the in-depth projects being evaluated this is the approach which is being adopted. In some cases, the ODI evaluator is being joined by a national, with requisite skills but without any knowledge or known view on the project. In other cases, however, and especially if the project being evaluated is under the care of a small southern NGO with few or no skills in evaluation, the national 'partner' on the team is often a person selected from the NGO, although usually not directly involved in the project and therefore not known to the beneficiaries or with responsibilities within the organisation for that particular neighbourhood.

The process and the manner in which the evaluations are to be structured and by which various judgements are to be approached are described in the rest of this section. The next section provides a check-list of a 'possibly relevant' guide to further questions, information-seeking and techniques for gathering data. Its purpose is to act as an *aide-mémoire* for the evaluators for raising subsidiary questions which *could be* of importance to the evaluation and as a guide to some of the information which, if obtainable, *might* help to provide answers to the key questions listed above.<sup>21</sup>

It is assumed that the evaluation team spends about five weeks on the evaluation of each project. The proposed structure of the evaluation can be sub-divided into five distinct phases:

- (1) preliminary project familiarisation;
- (2) initial visit to project and environs;
- (3) drawing initial conclusions and data-gap identification;
- (4) gathering further information;

---

<sup>21</sup> To hope for more than a guide is to go in search of the philosopher's stone: little more than this can be provided for evaluating the far more uniform world of official aid projects, as pointed out by Cracknell and Rednall [1986:3.13]:

*Although lists of performance indicators for different sectors have been produced by both CIDA and USAID, there are no ready-made solutions for measurement or data-collection which can easily be adapted from one project and applied to another. It is the responsibility of professional staff to identify, for each project, verifiable performance indicators.*

- (5) refining conclusions and writing up.<sup>22</sup>

#### IV.2 Preliminary Project Familiarisation

The project assessment begins with initial (critical) background reading of project files and discussion with key project personnel which will provide a fairly comprehensive, and very important, 'first impressions' view of the project. It should be done keeping in mind at least the more general questions covered in the check-list in the next section. This phase should lead to a firm grasp of the purpose and objectives of the project, the methods of implementation, the importance of gender issues and gender impact, any changes in either of these and the major snags encountered, as well, importantly, as an initial view of the judgement of the NGO concerning at least the general thrust of the project - its overall impact and the effectiveness and efficiency with which project objectives have been achieved.

#### IV.3 Initial Visit to Project and Environs

The second phase of the evaluation consists of the first 'hands-on' visit to the project. This visit is at one level undertaken to acquire more detailed information about the workings of the project, as well as to obtain a better understanding of how it 'fits into' the wider lives of those termed the project 'beneficiaries', as well as to begin to unravel where are the gaps in knowledge. But at another level, it is also the beginnings of the process of developing initial judgements about the project's impact and possible problems.<sup>23</sup>

This initial visit would normally involve discussion with at least community leaders and if possible some of the 'ordinary' project beneficiaries - if no women are brought forward on these occasions steps need to be taken to discuss the project with women

---

<sup>22</sup> Readers familiar with the evaluation literature, particularly that of the last ten to fifteen years concerned with the more 'quick and dirty' techniques, may attempt to associate the approach outlined here with what is now termed Rapid Rural Appraisal or RRA. While there clearly is some overlap in approach, two differences would appear to be that RRA is designed to be undertaken by a group of professionals, usually in a multi-disciplinary team, whereas here the initial approach uses a professional but in the hope that the method can be used in the future by non-professionals; additionally the approach used here is one more concerned with project impact within a particular community than appraisal of an isolated project. Similarities would include the intention of approaching the exercise with a critical eye and the importance of continually cross-checking the information received. For a discussion of RRA see Conway [1987], and for a more recent discussion of RRA methods and approaches see RRA Notes, produced by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) London, from June 1988 onwards, and especially Number 7, 'Proceedings of RRA Review Workshop', Sussex, London.

<sup>23</sup> 'Albert Hirschman argued as long ago as 1967 that there was no such thing as a successful project, but only those with fewer problems' [see Tendler, 1987:7]. Tendler herself comments in similar vein [1982:143]: 'the evaluator should treat any success she runs across with a sense of awe.'

leaders and/or women beneficiaries. Additionally, this visit would also include initial discussion with the relevant local government officials and agencies.

#### **IV.4 Drawing Initial Conclusions and Data-Gap Identification**

This third phase of the project assessment is probably the most crucial. As it is also utilises a technique rather different from that used in more conventional evaluations, some explanation is provided.

Conventional evaluations commonly consist of three distinct phases: first, an extended period of data-gathering (which includes interviews and survey work, as appropriate) followed, secondly, by data analysis and, finally, by the writing of a report which includes the evaluators' overall and more detailed conclusions. While in the best evaluations the conclusions drawn will almost certainly have been tested against alternative or opposing views, a discussion of conclusions with the different actors involved in the project is not normally considered a constituent part of the evaluation method. In contrast, in the approach to evaluation described here, the sharing of initial judgements made (and eventually firmer conclusions) with the main actors is a constituent part of the process of evaluation. It begins in this phase of the assessment.

Phase three is concerned principally with the ordering of ideas about the project and in planning the subsequent gathering of more detailed data (if this is deemed necessary). It consists of a number of elements, the unifying theme of which is forming judgements. The most important task here is to assess the extent to which it is possible to make firm judgements about the project under investigation and its different constituent parts.

The completion of phases one and two of the evaluation should enable three sorts of judgement tentatively to be made. First, the team should be able to give *preliminary* answers to all the main and subsidiary questions listed above, in the form YES, NO or DON'T KNOW. Second, it should also be possible to indicate the basis for this judgement: the evidence being weak, strong or conflicting. Finally, and where relevant, it should be possible to judge the possibility of obtaining better data to provide stronger evidence to come to a firmer judgement about the different questions about which there is still uncertainty.

We have reached this stage of the discussion of method without addressing an area of major debate in the literature (and one of particular concern to NGOs), namely the respective merits of quantitative versus qualitative data. As is well known, an important element in the debate about evaluation, particularly of projects which have a social component, focuses on the supposed greater 'objectivity' of quantitative data and the 'subjectivity' of qualitative data. Yet for NGO projects (and perhaps also for others - this is of no direct concern to us here) what is critical is not so much the nature and accuracy of the data either at one's disposal or which it might be possible

to obtain but rather the level of consensus over whether objectives have been reached. Thus what is often more important than attempting either to measure quantitative effects accurately, or to place a particular value on quantitative data is to assess the extent to which a particular judgement about objectives is consistently shared by the different relevant actors - in this case the beneficiaries, the NGO project staff and other local non-beneficiaries including government and/or political agents. How these issues and, in general, how phase three work could proceed in practice can best be illustrated by means of an example.

Figure 1 provides a matrix of the range of possible answers and judgements arising from the first key question, Number (1), whether, overall, the project is a success. Similar matrices can readily be constructed for the other questions listed above - all that is changed is the question posed.<sup>24</sup> Filling in the matrix accomplishes a number of important objectives, acting as both a classifier of data and a basis for deciding whether more data is both required and can be obtained. It provides a filter to indicate whether firm answers are already available, can easily be obtained or are never likely to emerge within the confines of the relatively short period for evaluation. This can perhaps be seen most readily by looking more closely at the different answers the evaluators judge most appropriate.

- **Obtaining answers 1 or 5** indicates that firm conclusions are *already* known and that therefore no further evaluation work needs to be done - and no additional data need to be collected - to answer fully the question posed. If this happens, the next phase of the evaluation becomes redundant and evaluators will move straight on to phase five, writing the conclusions.
- **Answers 11 and 14** (although polar opposites) also lead one straight on to phase five, but for different reasons. The judgement here is that clear answers not only have not emerged, but that they are unlikely to emerge even if more work (proposed under phase four) were to be undertaken.

---

<sup>24</sup> The following six additional 'Question' matrices could also be drawn up on the basis of the key questions listed above:

- Has the project had an impact in addressing the problems of poverty?
- Have the benefits of the project been distributed equitably between different groups of people - richer, poorer, men and women, landed and landless?
- Has the change of economic status of the beneficiaries been due more to the impact of the project than to the influence of other non-project factors?
- Were the project costs appropriate to the range, level and distribution of benefits?
- Will NGO withdrawal cause particular problems/  
Did NGO withdrawal cause particular problems?
- Can this type of project be effectively replicated?

Figure 1: Matrix of Initial Judgements on Questions

QUESTION: Has the project been a success in achieving its objectives?		
<u>Answer</u>	<u>Basis of judgement</u>	<u>Possibility of obtaining better data (qualitative or quantitative)</u>
1. YES	Strong evidence	Not relevant
2. YES	Weak evidence	Easy to obtain better data
3. YES	Weak evidence	Difficult but possible to obtain better data
4. YES	Weak evidence	Impossible to obtain better data
-----		
5. NO	Strong evidence	Not relevant
6. NO	Weak evidence	Easy to obtain better data
7. NO	Weak evidence	Difficult but possible to obtain better data
8. NO	Weak evidence	Impossible to obtain better data
-----		
9. DON'T KNOW	Little evidence	Easy to obtain better data
10. DON'T KNOW	Little evidence	Difficult but possible to obtain better data
11. DON'T KNOW	Little evidence	Impossible to obtain better data
12. DON'T KNOW	Conflicting evidence	Easy to obtain better data
13. DON'T KNOW	Conflicting evidence	Difficult but possible to obtain better data
14. DON'T KNOW	Conflicting evidence	Impossible to obtain better data

- **Answers 4 and 8** are also rather disappointing for three reasons: because the conclusions drawn are based on weak evidence, because there is next to no chance of further evaluation strengthening the conclusions and because, therefore, there would appear to be few if any firm conclusions that *can* be made.

- **Answers 2, 6, 9 and 12** provide the firmest basis for embarking upon *further* evaluation, as well as indicating the *form* that the evaluation will take. In these instances, the nature of subsequent evaluation work undertaken in phase four will be relatively simple to organise. This is because the questions to be addressed and the method of obtaining the data will both be clear, while the confidence of obtaining that data will also be high. Undertaking further evaluation in response to answers 2 and 6 would be particularly simple, as the work involves confirming or challenging the original (in this case weak) hypothesis.
- **Answers 3, 7, 10 and 13** are the cases where the evidence is weak or strong-but-conflicting and where there is some hope, but no guarantee, that further evaluation work will lead to a firmer basis for drawing conclusions. Selecting these options itself points to the decision to undertake further evaluation work in phase four (otherwise answers 4, 8, 11 or 14 would have been chosen). Answers 3 and 7 also provide the basis for constructing hypotheses and for their testing in phase four.
- Responding to the matrix question with **answers 4, 8, 11 and 14** indicates that a firm 'don't know' and a rather tentative 'yes or no' answer are thus two outcomes of this particular approach to NGO project evaluation. It needs to be acknowledged, therefore, that potentially inconclusive answers are one of the costs of using the method. On the other hand, it is also possible to derive firm conclusions. Additionally, whatever conclusions are drawn, the basis for the conclusion is also specified - an important riposte to the charge of sloppiness which, as indicated above, could be made against less than 'state of the art' approaches to evaluation.

#### IV.5 Gathering Further Information

Phase four is concerned with gathering further information about the project, where the results from the previous phase of the evaluation deem this possible and useful. In approaching this part of the evaluation, note should be taken of the title of this subsection: '*Gathering Further Information*' and *not* '*Gathering Further Data*'. The reason for drawing this distinction is to caution against embarking on a complex exercise of extracting detailed quantitative data unless one can be relatively sure both that the data required *can* be obtained and that it will be of a sort which will help to provide significant further evidence to enable clearer judgements to be made on the key evaluation questions.

Particularly where uncertainty over the impact of a project is related to *conflicting* rather than *weak* evidence, obtaining a better grasp of *why viewpoints differ* could well be a quick and relatively easy way of understanding (and being able to argue) why there is a conflict of view. The initial preference, therefore, in phase four work is first

to assess the strengths of opting for the interview-technique of obtaining more information on the views of the various 'actors' on the aspects of the project being addressed, and only thereafter to attempt to obtain more quantitative data.<sup>25</sup>

Phase four interviews are likely to be more formal and lengthy than those undertaken in phases one and two, with the types of questions raised less open-ended; these are likely to be guided more by the relevant parts of the check-list of issues contained in the next section. This still leaves open the questions of *how* the interviews should be structured, and how one searches out those who may be reluctant to give their views. Without making a hard and fast rule, it would appear to be potentially more enriching (even if also more difficult) to interview by challenging the views of those directly involved in the project, particularly if these differ from the ones the evaluators have, rather than conducting what is often termed a 'value-free' interview. On the other hand, it would probably be preferable to conduct a more open-ended interview (that is without overtly raising leading questions) with the beneficiaries of the project, especially if it is judged that they are likely to be reluctant or afraid voluntarily to proffer a view at variance with that of the project staff or sponsors or the government.<sup>26</sup> As for eliciting the more in-depth views of other actors (government or other relevant local individuals or institutional representatives), a judgement will clearly have to be made as to the manner (direct or indirect) in which the interviews are conducted. This itself will, of course, depend upon the type of information to be elicited and the bias that might be anticipated from the various respondents.

Finally, it is likely that in this phase of the evaluation some sort of additional quantitative data gathering *will* be judged both useful to have and possible to obtain, particularly in relation to understanding the degree to which the project has led to the enhancement of economic status of the poor. The sorts of data that might prove useful to have here are listed in the next section. The way one attempts to *gather* this sort of data needs to be assessed both in relation to a fairly short period of time (two to three weeks) and, importantly, to the ability of the evaluators to analyse and be able to draw conclusions from the data so gathered.<sup>27</sup> Three examples of easier-

---

<sup>25</sup> Widstrand, in characteristically controversial style, confirms these views thus [1990:6]:

*It may irritate development economists to hear, but if you need sophisticated calculations to justify an action it is probably wrong. Terrible disasters result from gross and elementary errors of concept, not from marginal mistakes in abstruse calculations like discounted cash flows or internal rate of return.*

<sup>26</sup> Of course the degree of willingness to provide frank answers will itself depend on a complexity of factors relating to the importance of the project in the overall lives of the beneficiaries, the political sensitivity of the project, and the extent to which democratic and independent views are tolerated in practice within the confines of the locality where the project is situated.

<sup>27</sup> In social science data gathering exercises, there is always a degree of uncertainty in deriving firm conclusions from the data source. While statistical techniques are able to indicate the degree of confidence one can have in the results of analysis, this is not possible unless one either utilises data from the whole population, or obtains data from a random sample. In practice, neither is likely to happen [see Bardhan, 1989].

to-more-complex methods of obtaining primary data on income and wealth - involving increasing amounts of time and levels of expertise - are given here. It is very unlikely that method (c), or similar approaches, would be used in evaluating these particular NGO projects.<sup>28</sup>

- (a) Evaluator-initiated visible counting of assets and signs of wealth of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, complemented by some in-depth interviews especially to obtain a sense of non-project influences and distribution of benefits.
- (b) More structured sample interviews with beneficiaries, including some assessment of current income and wealth and sources of these, together with historical recall of trends in income and wealth and importance of project influences.
- (c) Comprehensively-administered survey based on total population or rigorous sampling techniques listing all sources of income and net present value of all assets, including an estimated indicator of potential future income streams based on level of education reached. This to be compared with income and wealth estimates at the time immediately prior to project commencement and with parallel surveys and estimates for non-project beneficiaries in similar location. For the latter, use to be made, where available, of base-line data, surveys of the region undertaken by the government or other donor agencies and/or a comprehensive administered survey based on total population or rigorous sampling techniques of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, listing all sources of income and the base-line value of all assets, updated to current prices.

Beyond these comments and the check-list of issues in the next section, little more can be said at the level of generalities. Whatever further evaluation work is carried out, phase four ends with analysing this new information and/or data which has been generated and feeding the conclusions back to the particular question matrix illustrated in Figure 1. This completes the evaluation prior to the writing up of the conclusions.

---

<sup>28</sup> This is on the assumption that NGO evaluations are being conducted with limited supplies of time, finance and evaluator skills. But even when resources and time are relatively unlimited the chances of obtaining firm results from such methods are slim. As Barclay [1979:19] comments after evaluating NGO projects in Kenya and Niger:

*When generalised statistical data had been collected in an area, they usually did not provide sufficient detail on the characteristics of specific project participation groups and where data had been assembled within the context of the project itself, they were usually not structured to permit rigorous attribution of change to project interventions.*

#### IV.6 Refining Conclusions and Writing Up

The overall approach to the assessment of NGO projects proposed here has involved the repeated making, as well as checking the potential bias, of judgements about the project, from the earliest stages of the evaluation process. As a result there will have been an almost continual devising, testing and refining of views, assumptions and conclusions about the project in general and in relation to the nine basic questions listed above. If the approach has achieved its objectives, either almost all the conclusions of the assessment will by now be known, or, alternatively, the areas where conclusions will *not* be known will also be clearly demarcated. Thus phase five consists of a relatively simple process of writing up the various conclusions.

These should be presented as follows. First, the report's **cover page** would provide four discrete pieces of information:

- the name of the project;
- a brief description, including commencement, completion (if relevant), number of beneficiaries and objectives;
- date of evaluation and names of evaluators;
- status of report (Confidential/Non-Confidential), and if marked 'confidential' reference to pages which are deemed confidential with a brief description of why, in a couple of sentences.

This would usually be followed by the report **summary**, which could be structured thus. For each project, each of the key questions are listed in order, adapted where necessary to the precise form of words used for each project. Under each question a summary of the conclusions drawn should be given, covering not more than five lines each. This listing of the Questions and Answers would thus cover two to three pages and would constitute the summary conclusions of the respective evaluations.

The report summary should be followed by the **complete** (but still not lengthy) **evaluation report**. While more detail is required in this part, the general rule is the shorter the report the better, providing - especially where the reports conclusions are either new to the NGO or different from those commonly held -that there is some discussion of why these different conclusions are drawn.

This would be followed, as applicable, by the **annexes** to the report: the first giving a list of people consulted, the second a list of relevant documents consulted. These two would normally be completed for all project evaluation reports. Annex three would give a brief description of any particular methods of information/data collection and approaches used to form the judgements made, including, if deemed of interest, reflections on the approach adopted. Finally, but only if judged appropriate, a fourth annex would include any statistical and other data deemed relevant for inclusion.

It is to be expected that the overall length of each project evaluation report, excluding the appendices but including the 2-3 page summary and the title page, would be around 25 pages of 1½-spaced A4 size paper.

## V. CHECK-LIST OF QUESTIONS AND APPROACHES FOR DISCRETE PROJECT EVALUATIONS

### V.1 Introduction

In broad terms, there would appear to be three *different* types of criteria that evaluators need to be conscious of when attempting to assess and come to a judgement about a project aimed at enhancing economic status.

- The first is the extent to which the social and economic status of the 'beneficiaries' has been improved.
- The second is to judge whether the outcome has been worth the time, effort and money put in.
- The third is the risk element.

The 'ideal' (least controversial) scenario for putting a label of success on a project would be if it has made a significant impact on alleviating the poverty of the beneficiaries, at little cost and with few, if any, risks. Likewise if the project, perversely, led to greater poverty of the 'beneficiaries', and this outcome arose after pouring in massive amounts of money, time and effort - but again if few, if any, risks were involved - then the judgement drawn would be not only that the project was a failure but that a similar project should not be attempted.

More common will be results which do not produce a consistent outcome, judged against these different criteria. Thus a project could be attempting to address part of the poverty problems of the beneficiaries and be partially successful in doing so, but at costs which seem to be high. Not impossible to conceive are projects which achieve significant improvements in economic well-being but at a very high cost. Alternatively, projects achieve ambiguous results in terms of outcome and costs incurred, but because the beneficiaries are so poor, marginalised and deprived, even marginal improvements at substantial cost are deemed worth all the time and effort put in because the 'alternative of not assisting' would certainly have led to worse poverty or even death.<sup>29</sup> In this context, Tendler writes [1982:143]:

*Most successful projects will be only partly so. The most important part of the project may be a resounding success, but there may also be a failure that is just as resounding. It is very important to give a differentiated picture of the project, rather than an "on average" picture of success or failure. A contrasting of the parts that are working well to those that are not will contribute to an understanding of what made the success in one area, and prevented realization in another.*

---

<sup>29</sup>

This is more likely to occur in the case of emergency assistance.

It is in this context that we can consider the check-list of issues and questions which need to be considered by the evaluators of the NGO projects aimed (at least in part) at enhancing the economic status of the beneficiaries. We begin with one issue which pervades all others, that of gender.

## V.2 Gender Issues

There is no need here to list the facts of discrimination against women in many societies nor to provide arguments to show therefore that gender issues need to be analysed in project evaluation. Suffice it to say that women as individuals, and often within the context of the family or household unit, tend to be the objects of discrimination resulting in greater poverty or vulnerability to poverty. While they tend also to have to spend more time working, they are usually less well equipped both with assets and with influence in their communities to be able to escape from poverty and low income. As a result it can usually be assumed that if projects are silent on gender issues, they will be especially vulnerable to perpetuation - or even accentuation - of inherited differences between the sexes.

As gender issues pervade the *whole* spectrum of concerns raised in relation to evaluating NGO projects, there is no particular method of approaching this question. Rather, there needs to be a focus on gender during each and every stage of the evaluation, to discover the manner in which women in particular have been, variously, consulted, ignored or affected in pre-project work, the statement of project objectives, implementation, benefits, costs, implementation, direct and indirect results.

It is also important to analyse the *consequence* of improvements in the economic status of women. This is because it can by no means be assumed either that these women will necessarily have access to the increased income or wealth or, even if they have, that sanctions and further discrimination will not be brought upon them as a result of a real or perceived threat to the *mores* of traditional society.

A word needs to be added about potential bias in the information gathered about a project unless (and perhaps even if) the particular problems of gender discrimination are addressed. The fact that women tend to be discriminated against means not only that the views of women on the project being evaluated are likely to be suppressed/ignored/mis-represented, but also that it is not going to be easy to remove such bias. While efforts can be made to obtain information about the impact on women - by always incorporating gender questions - the views of women obtained by, for instance, interviewing them in a non-threatening environment may themselves *still* be biased by their role and place in society.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the broad issues of gender and aid evaluation see Swantz [1990]. Increasing numbers of British NGOs are addressing gender issues specifically. For instance, the Christian Aid checklist on project implementation and benefits (for projects wider than the present narrower focus of those concerned primarily with poverty-alleviation) contains the following questions:

This could occur, on the one hand, because they have not been made fully aware of, and therefore are not able to articulate clearly, the range and manner of discrimination against them. Or, on the other hand, it could arise because the evaluator and the project are perceived as a part of the very problem which women experience. The former problem cannot, of course, be solved by the evaluator or the evaluation. The latter can be tempered, at least partially, if the women beneficiaries believe that the evaluator is going to be sensitive to the particular problems they face in their communities. This problem is most likely to be addressed if at least one member of the evaluation team is a woman known to these beneficiaries; it is least likely to be addressed if the evaluators are all identified by the women as representative of male-dominated society - especially if they are male and from a class, caste or strand of society perceived by the women as dominant.

### V.3 Overall Assessment of a Project

In a sense, the entire process of evaluation is geared to obtaining a better understanding of how a project is working. Nonetheless, there are certain core questions and issues which need to be raised at the start of the investigation, even if they are clarified and refined as the assessment proceeds.

What *are* the objectives of the project? List them. Are some of these more and some less important? Have they all been specified (sometimes objectives could appear to be so 'obvious' that they are never specified). Get a sense of the balance between - and, if possible, list - quantitative and tangible objectives and qualitative and intangible objectives. Have these different objectives been changed during the course of the project life? Is there agreement over objectives by both the northern and southern NGOs (where applicable) and by the beneficiaries and other actors in the locality? Do all the different actors understand what the objectives are and how they shall be attained?

What is the **time-frame** for the achievement of objectives? Do all the actors know about the time-frame and different steps to be taken for the achievement of objectives?

- 
- a. Are women involved at all stages of the execution of the plan?
  - b. Does the project improve both women's access to and control of resources and benefits?
  - c. Which practical and/or strategic needs of women is the project meeting, *i.e.* is there continuing attention to possible changes in the pattern of women's lives - in their status or income, in the creation of new roles or in the enhancing of traditional ones? At the very least, a project should not be detrimental to women.
  - d. Where training opportunities are available but are not taken up, some assessment of the reasons is required.
  - e. Have women and men in the community grown in gender awareness through their interaction in the project?

What sort of **participation by the beneficiaries** took place prior to the project starting and what sort of participation has been taking place during the life of the project?

Have the **inputs** required to achieve the objectives been specified? Where do they come from and what role do the beneficiaries and other actors have in contributing inputs to the project? Separate the inputs which are expected to come from the NGO, those that will come from the environment of the project and those that are dependent upon other agencies (e.g. of government). If inputs are to come from the beneficiaries, to what extent are these inputs themselves dependent upon factors outside the project? Do all the different actors understand what the inputs are and how they shall be obtained?

List the expected **benefits or outputs**. Discuss whether there are mechanisms from within the project that have been devised to measure them and the extent to which these have been achieved. What is the timing of expected benefits? Additionally were there any indicators of performance or achievement, explicit or otherwise, specified at the outset of the project? If these have not been specified try to discover why. Discuss (see below) methods that might be suitable for evaluating the extent to which benefits have been achieved and how they might be measured. If outputs are to be sold, what work was done to judge the market and fluctuations in price?

What methods have been proposed and procedures adopted for **changing inputs into outputs**. How do these differ for different types of input and output? What sort of time-frame is envisaged. What sort of bottle-necks were foreseen or could be foreseen? Get a sense of the extent to which the project is 'self-contained' and the extent to which project success is determined by factors outside the project.

**Who** is responsible for seeing that this process takes place? Who are the key initiators of the project cycle and responsible for **managing** key decisions in the various stages of the project from start-up through to implementation and eventual completion? If the project has different components, who is responsible for each and for fitting them together? What skills are needed for project continuation (obtaining inputs, changing inputs into outputs) and do the different actors responsible for these processes have the requisite training and skills to perform them?<sup>31</sup>

#### V.4 Evaluating Benefits

As the projects we are considering here are those among whose objectives are to enhance economic status of the beneficiaries, the benefits which need to be the subject of the deepest enquiry are those which help to raise income (whether in cash or kind) or to increase wealth (also in cash or kind).

---

<sup>31</sup> Edwards [1989] maintains that he cannot recall a single time in Zambia or Malawi when inadequate training did not feature as a problem inhibiting project implementation. For a practical discussion of the management and skill weaknesses in projects see Banga [1981].

Some preliminary issues need to be raised and sorted out in the investigator's mind. First, the benefits need to be listed and separated into those which are intended to alleviate, or have the effect of alleviating, poverty, and the rest.<sup>32</sup> Second, it is necessary to have an initial view of the extent to which those which do have a poverty alleviating objective can be measured quantitatively, which can be assessed qualitatively and those for which there may be little hope of assessing results. Third, it is important to obtain a sense of the importance of the project and its poverty alleviating characteristics to the overall problems of poverty of the beneficiaries. Fourth, it is important throughout the investigation of benefits to seek (and try to establish) the extent to which assessed benefits have accrued on the one hand as a result of the project, and on the other as a result of factors external to the project. In this context, especially in many areas of sub-Saharan Africa, a fall in living standards could be equated with 'project success' if the evidence suggests that an even greater fall in living standards would have occurred in the absence of the project.

Measuring the benefits of a project necessarily involves making comparisons. The best data for this exercise tend to be those which can provide an indication of living standards 'now' compared with what they were at some time in the past and which are able to trace the cause of improvement (or lack of it) to the project. Less satisfactory - but maybe the best approach available - is to compare the living standards today of project beneficiaries with those of non-project beneficiaries today, provided, too, that one is able to trace the causes of the differences.

Clearly, if it is not possible to identify differences in living standards and not possible to isolate the causes of these differences, it will equally not be possible to ascertain the benefits accruing. On the other hand, the more accurately one can pinpoint the differences and their causes, the better able one will be to judge the benefits of the project under investigation.

#### □ Measuring Benefits

Ideally, changes in income/wealth can best be obtained by comparing assessment of present wealth and income status with base-line data available from the time immediately prior to the project's commencement. Yet for most economic enhancement projects funded by British NGOs considered here this information is simply not available.<sup>33</sup> Thus methods of obtaining both current and past income/wealth levels will be likely to have to include one or all of the following (in rough order of accuracy): visual inspection and direct observation; casual discussion with project staff and beneficiaries; trawling secondary data and materials already

---

<sup>32</sup> In some cases, the benefits of the projects will have been specified quite precisely in the project's objectives; more often, however, the evaluators will have to flesh out the general objectives of the project - such as 'helping to alleviate poverty' - into more specific objectives and benefits.

<sup>33</sup> The lack of baseline income data does not appear to have been such a major problem with, for instance, projects funded by US PVOs.

available; project records; examining existing survey data; group interview techniques; in-depth interviews. It is likely that a mixture of these approaches to obtaining data will be utilised, depending upon the need to obtain data (discussed in the previous section) and the likelihood of the data gathered contributing to answering the questions posed.

Each of the methods used requires care and caution and an awareness not only of possible inaccuracy (uncertainty over recall of past income levels) but also of respondent and even enumerator bias. Thus, visual inspection of newly purchased goods or houses may *appear* to indicate enhanced economic status, but one needs to be certain that this represents something more than normal replacement of worn out goods and housing.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, individual recall of past income/wealth by beneficiaries is likely to be biased strongly by the perceptions the beneficiaries have of the project and the evaluators. If they believe that more funding will come by showing that improvements up to now have been minimal, then historical indicators of wealth will be played up: if they believe that such funding will be more likely to come as a result of indicating past success, then historical indicators of wealth will be played down. Cross-checking of different data-sources should be done wherever possible, as this should make a major contribution to reducing such bias.

One of the key assets and sources of income is clearly land. As well as size of holdings, other important factors are its quality, the intensity with which it is cultivated, its ownership (and possible rental value) and its location - people own and have access to parcels of land in different localities.

Income can be derived from various sources, including land, and accrue in both monetary and non-monetary form. There is direct employment, temporary employment, self-employment. Non-monetary income can come in the form of both physical assets (maize, vegetables, chickens, manure) and services (work done, transport provided, the manner in which access to social, especially government-provided, services is gained). Monetary income can come from sale of agricultural products, sale of non-agricultural products, the provision of services (legal and illegal), and from rent of land and capital assets. It is easy to miss income sources from sale of produce or other goods because of the variety of different markets - formal and informal - which exist in rural areas. As Castro *et al.* observe [1981:406], many crops do not enter the 'market' but are sold earlier to a range of different people. Additionally income for a family can come from different family members, and its sources will tend

---

<sup>34</sup>

It is widely recognised that poorer males in Britain tend to look better dressed than their more affluent compatriots. This is both because the richer can afford to purchase more expensive longer-lasting clothes and because their higher status does not necessitate conformity in dress.

to vary both during the different seasons of a year and from one year to another, especially if the area/region is susceptible to drought.

Finally there is income derived from credit sources, both formal (banks) and informal (money-lenders). While poor people are frequently in debt to informal money-lenders, establishing yet further complexities in social relations and obligations, large outstanding loans can equally be a sign of wealth. It is therefore essential to try to 'get behind' the visible signs of wealth and income, and this will usually require one to 'get a sense of history'.<sup>35</sup>

Another potential problem concerns the need to separate out differences, often quite marked, between gross and net income. Clearly for benefits to arise, the examination of changes in income and wealth ought to refer to *net*, and not gross, income. As our interest is in real changes in economic status, the figures of interest are income and wealth *less* deductions for borrowing, hire purchase, *etc.* Especially in agricultural societies, therefore, where credit cycles fluctuate within and between seasons, it is important to know at what time of the year comparative income measures are made.

All of this suggests that estimating income is no easy matter - estimating **differences of income** is even more problematic, especially if such differences are estimated by methods of individual recall. One way of trying to check the estimates of income made is to make other estimates, for instance of **expenditure and saving**. Expenditure in rural societies tends to be skewed towards durable goods, while saving can be in the form of both cash and kind. Overall, however, sufficient should have been said to be able to concur with the observation of Connell and Lipton [1977:27], based on numerous detailed village studies:

*... despite the fundamental role of income . . . it is usually the least useful information in village surveys unless the methodology is clearly stated in a way that clarifies the concept of income used, shows the reliability of the measurements and explains the method of data collection.*

And one final point: even if you eventually do obtain numbers, do not consider them as final, but rather as the basis for further thought or discussion [Castro *et al.* 1981,417].

Besides money (in the bank or under the bed), wealth indicators range also across the spectrum of tangible and non-tangible assets. Besides land (where size, quality and location are *all* important), housing and

housing differences are often good indicators of wealth differences, as can be clothing, jewelry and other personal accessories. Similarly, capital equipment can be a good indicator of wealth and wealth differences: tractors, ploughs, bicycles, carts, granaries, numbers of livestock, radios, pots, pans, chairs, tables, *etc.*, as well (often) as articles used for religion and ritual. Then there are **social indicators of wealth** which tend to feature in various cycles of *rites de passage* of people and communities. Thus the manner in which people bury their relatives and celebrate births, and the numbers invited to weddings, can all give good proxy indicators of wealth and status.

It is, however, unlikely that an external evaluator will be able to judge accurately either levels of wealth or changes in wealth, especially in isolated rural communities. It is thus essential that time be spent discussing wealth indicators with project beneficiaries and other members of the local society, at minimum to pinpoint what are perceived to be the important items indicating wealth and prestige, possibly through the use of wealth-ranking indicators.

For both income and wealth assessment, a (crude) supplementary or additional method of judging both present status and historical changes is through what are termed **income and wealth proxies**. For individuals, these would include diet, levels of nutrition, education and years of schooling, as well as the changing employment profiles of family members. (Here it is assumed that better is equated with improved wealth and income). It is also important to be able to change wealth and income differences between different groups: men and women, cultivators and labourers, different castes, *etc.*

There are, however, differences not only between individuals within communities but also between different communities. Analysing differences in wealth and income *between* communities can be approached by attempting to assess the relative power of each to attract resources and services to themselves and the manner in which this is changing. Thus, the location of new educational, health and infrastructural services in the locality (rather than over the hill) could be the result of a greater power to command such facilities. More explicitly, the acceptance of nomination (by the party at a regional or national level) of more people from *this* community would also indicate increased status and standing.

Considering these issues leads to the highlighting of other non-economic benefits. Many NGOs maintain that one of their particular strengths lies in 'strengthening local organisations', or, more generally, in 'consciousness-raising'. The first question to raise here is whether these sorts of issues were specifically mentioned in the project objectives, and if not why not. If they were, was there any link made between achieving these objectives

and poverty alleviation, if not why not? Next, one needs to try to pinpoint what concretely was done in strengthening local organisations or in consciousness-raising: have organisations been set up, have new forms of contact with government official or agencies been established, has the perception of project beneficiaries been sharpened towards their society, their role and potential power in local issues? If so in what manner?

All this is by way of introduction to the more critical question (for our purposes) of *whether* changes in these areas *have* led to any impact in relation to poverty alleviation? If the answer is in the affirmative, is it possible to pinpoint *what* this impact has been: greater access to services, provision of new services, access to more jobs, greater ease in marketing produce or in obtaining inputs either to the project or, more generally, to enhance agricultural production? Also of relevance is to ask whether these gains have been additional to or at the expense of non-beneficiaries, or to the cost of other people in the locality.<sup>36</sup>

As NGOs are external agencies and, in relation to the community in which they work, are usually organisations with considerable power, one would be led to expect some positive social and/or political outcome from their presence, at least in relation to the 'beneficiaries'. As a result, if there is little positive to report from the questions raised in the two preceding paragraphs, *this* would merit further investigation. Why has the presence of this 'powerful' external organisation with at least some standing with the government **NOT** lead to improvements in status and standing for those whom it has selected to assist?<sup>37</sup>

To end this section, a final general comment. For all the indicators mentioned here, it is important - for the purposes of the evaluation - to attempt to judge the importance of the project's poverty alleviating benefits in relation to both total wealth and income (as appropriate) and to the other benefits which accrue to the beneficiaries. Thus estimates of present and past values need to be complemented with estimates of the share from different sources: project and non-project.

## V.6 Project Costs

Project costs can be separated out into *direct* and *indirect or hidden* costs. As their name suggests, these latter costs include those that tend not to appear in the 'cost' side of projects, as drawn up by the NGO, but which are nonetheless spent. The first job

<sup>36</sup> In short, the opportunity cost of the project.

<sup>37</sup> This point is taken up again below in the discussion of non-quantifiable costs.

is to try to pinpoint what these costs are, for only then can one move on to estimating them. The costs can be grouped roughly as follows.

- (a) The cost of the time (therefore salary and wage costs) of people who have been or are involved in the project. This is time spent on the project (perhaps as a share of total time spent on all projects), including time spent on meetings to get the project approved and on meetings to report back on progress. Salary and wage costs, of course, are the *gross*, not simply the net, figures; thus they need to include the relevant part of the total salary or wage costs incurred by the NGO rather than simply the amount received by the person working on the project.
- (b) The cost of servicing the project. This would include phone, postage, telex, fax, and reports written, but also at least a part of travel costs (airfare and *per diem*) of British NGOs visiting the country where the project is located.

In attempting to identify these costs, two useful concepts are the project **life-cycle** and **location**. The project life-cycle begins with start-up costs, goes through to running costs and ends with completion costs. The costs of evaluation should also be included in the total cost structure, both ongoing monitoring and evaluation work and the one-off evaluation. The concept of location reminds the evaluator that for British projects in developing countries there are different levels of involvement, in each of which the project incurs costs. There is, first, the northern NGO itself; second, the southern NGO or partner (if applicable); third, the NGO country director or co-ordinator; and, finally, the people involved in managing the project at the project site. At each location there will be costs of time and costs of servicing the project. It is unlikely that these costs will appear obvious initially to those directly involved in the project, so they are likely to be pinpointed only after some discussion and understanding of the project history. At the project site, especially, it is likely that there will be considerable 'free' labour time devoted to the project by community leaders, by project beneficiaries in general and by women in particular.

In contrast with these indirect costs, the *direct* costs of the project are likely to be both more visible and easier to estimate. This is because it is these costs which will have been worked out for the procedure of project approval by the NGO. It is important, however, to make sure that the direct cost figures given are those of the total direct costs of the project and not simply the direct costs which have been submitted by the project or local sponsor to the funding agency. In this context one needs to be wary of a reverse trend to that discussed in relation to direct costs, namely the over-estimation of direct costs or mis-estimation of types of cost, especially if there are multi-funders. This occurs not only because grant recipients are always concerned to cover their costs (in the case of one or more funders failing to provide the target grant

applied for) but also because most funders dislike financing both recurrent and administrative costs, and would prefer to fund the 'coal-face' end of projects.<sup>38</sup>

We need to return to indirect costs to raise a final issue. The previous discussion covered only the first aspect - pinpointing the costs; it failed to go on to estimate what these costs are and have been. This was deliberate, because it is likely to be quite a time-consuming exercise to attempt to make an accurate estimation of all the different indirect costs. The question this raises is whether it is going to be necessary to go through such an exercise in detail. As discussed above, direct costs are likely to be all but readily available. What is most important overall is not so much to obtain an accurate dollar/pound value of indirect costs (although one will be lured into doing so because the direct costs are likely to be provided in detail to the last cent/penny) but to get a sense of the share of total costs likely to have originated in the indirect component. Such a share can then be used together with the known direct costs to give an estimate of the total costs of the project. This can be judged fairly quickly by an assessment of time spent on the project (at different locations), multiplied up by salary/wage costs and, additionally, by picking up the main items of other indirect expenses obtained from (b) above.

While NGOs stress the importance of non-quantifiable factors in their interventions, greatest emphasis is usually placed on non-quantifiable benefits. It is also important, however, to raise questions about 'non-quantifiable' costs of their intervention, especially those related to displacement. The sorts of issues relevant here would include the following: does the project make more than minimal demands on the time of the beneficiaries; what are the opportunity costs of spending this time on the project rather than on other affairs; does the project draw on resources and equipment (land, labour or capital) which already provide a source of income, and if so can one judge whether the income/wealth earning capacity of the project is greater than income/wealth foregone? More difficult to assess is whether there were alternatives to this particular NGO project in terms of use of beneficiaries' time and resources which have been sacrificed; if so can the comparative costs be evaluated?

Displacement factors could also touch on consciousness-raising and power relations. Is the particular NGO the optimal channel for the beneficiaries to raise their awareness of socio-political issues and to draw resources to themselves? If there is either suspicion of NGOs on behalf of the government or suspicion of projects linked to northern NGOs, perhaps fomented by jealous southern NGOs, then, especially if local government organisation is strong, intervention could inhibit either the growth of local autonomy or else the benefits which would otherwise be expected from such

---

<sup>38</sup> The view given here, however, is not universally shared. For instance, Schneider maintains that direct costs tend to be underestimated by NGOs. He writes [1988:211]:

*NGOs are not always willing to divulge their budgets, or the real costs of their projects: in many cases they actually ignore them, and sometimes they feel it may be better not to reveal the precise investment figures for a project when they are seeking funding from various sources.*

association. Finally, are there costs of 'success', especially related to environmental damage or social disruption which might occur from changes in society resulting from increases in income and wealth of certain groups or classes? While a number of these issues might appear rather distant - even esoteric - and there would clearly be substantial difficulties in attempting to assess their effect, it is nonetheless important to be aware of them. Hence their inclusion in this check-list of issues and questions.

One of the purposes of obtaining costs data is clearly to put these up against the project benefits in order to come to one<sup>39</sup> judgement about the project's worth. This is the subject of the next section. Yet there are other stories that can be told with cost data on their own, without attempting to marry them to the benefits achieved. For instance, it could be of value to provide an estimate of the costs per beneficiary, both in total and worked out on an annual basis. These data could be used (cautiously) to compare costs of different projects within or, with more difficulty<sup>40</sup>, across countries. Similarly, variations in total project costs from year to year could be of importance, either if annual costs are rising or falling, or if these costs are widely different from those projected at the outset of the project (if such an exercise was ever carried out). Another set of comments on costs might be made by comparing both the overall shares of costs originating outside the country, those originating outside the project but inside the country and finally those from inside the project, and changes in these shares over time.

Another cost sub-division which might be worked out (or more usually estimated) is both the total costs incurred prior to project commencement and the share of indirect costs in this figure. Such data are of interest because of the reluctance of many funders in Britain to finance feasibility and pre-feasibility studies<sup>41</sup>. When NGOs are small and financially vulnerable such a situation can provide enormous pressures to attempt to execute a high proportion of projects which a 'wealthier' NGO might have the freedom to turn down. If such a situation is widespread, it would point to a greater in-built vulnerability of project failure of small NGOs. Finally, of course, it should always be helpful for an NGO to know the share of indirect and hidden costs in the total costs of a project, especially if these are significant.

---

<sup>39</sup> As pointed out above, there are other important judgements which can and should be made.

<sup>40</sup> The difficulty arises not so much in working out the numbers but more in relation to judging what the numbers mean. This arises because of often very large purchasing power differences across countries and even larger ones when comparisons are travelling not only across international boundaries but also from a rural area in one country to a rural area in another. There are even problems sometimes in assuming that money value comparisons equate like with like in a village on one side of a hill compared with a village on the other side of the same hill.

<sup>41</sup> Funding such pre-project work is now considered a normal part of the financial contribution that, for instance, the Swedish official aid agency, SIDA, makes to NGOs.

## V.6 Marrying Costs and Benefits

While one determinant of project success is the degree to which project objectives have been achieved in practice (including incorporation of the time-frame), another concerns the relationship between costs and benefits.

The previous section suggested that conventional cost-benefit analysis and techniques are unlikely to be suitable for evaluating the types of NGO projects considered here. This is in part because of the inadequacy of quantitative data, and in part because of the acknowledged importance of incorporating non-quantitative - or, better, not easily quantifiable - information into the overall assessment. This means that it is unlikely that cost-benefit ratios of the 'net present value' or 'internal rate of return' would be estimated - although if the data *were* available and the evaluators were able to manipulate the data<sup>42</sup>, the numbers would prove a useful component of the wider assessment.<sup>43</sup>

This does not mean, however, that no attempt would be made to marry up costs with benefits. One approach currently being promoted for NGO projects in the United States is through the calculation of the cost-effectiveness (C-E) ratio. This is defined as the present value of benefits divided by the present value of costs, as follows [Bowman *et al.* 1989:10]:

*The C-E Ratio equals NET BENEFITS (income of the project less an estimate of what the income would have been without the NGO input) DIVIDED BY direct and indirect costs less any fees paid by the project for services provided by the NGO.*

Even though the promoters of this method, Technoserve, stress that the C-E ratio should not be used on its own and should be supplemented by what are termed a 'non-quantifiable benefits rating', it is highly unlikely that the NGO projects to be considered here will have the basic data necessary to produce even this simpler ratio.<sup>44</sup>

The basic data required include the following: base-line data, accurate financial, income, wages and salary data of the project for its duration, detailed direct and indirect costs data for the NGO in relation to the project, accurate consumer price indices for the beneficiaries and a reliable applicable discount rate.

<sup>42</sup> This is not as difficult as it may appear, as some software packages do the calculations for one; all that is needed is to input the raw data. See, for instance, Silvert [1990].

<sup>43</sup> A readable introduction to social cost benefit analysis is Irvin [1976], while UNIDO [1978] is considered a classic text on the subject. See also Ray [1984] for a recent discussion of World Bank methods.

<sup>44</sup> However, it is more likely that the data necessary for calculating the C-E ratio are available than the data required to undertake a more orthodox SCBA; thus if such figures were to be derived there would be more hope that the C-E ratio would be the figure calculated.

The Technoserve approach is similar to the more commonly known cost-effectiveness approach<sup>45</sup>, although the latter usually estimates rather than calculates costs. This is simply and generally the cost per unit of output, which for our purposes could be adapted to:

the net income and/or wealth generated by the project divided by the direct and indirect costs of the project.

If this figure is divided by the number of beneficiaries of the project, then the cost per beneficiary would be the result.

It is, however, unlikely that even this - relatively crude - approach could be utilised for the present set of NGO projects. There are three basic problems with any general approach geared to producing a quantitative answer. The first is that it is unlikely that even the limited types of data required will be applicable to most projects.<sup>46</sup> The second is that the approach proposed in the previous section is based on the principle that data will only be collected if they are accessible, if there are questions which could be answered by obtaining that extra data and if it is possible to collect them in a limited space of time. Thirdly, whatever is said to the contrary, there is no doubt that when models are established to create quantitative indices of performance, these indices are taken more seriously than is the non-quantifiable descriptive information. Even in describing the simplest cost-effectiveness approach, Armstrong and Bridger argue that their method would not be necessary for a high number of projects, and they were not considering NGO projects at all!<sup>47</sup>

This is not to argue to the other extreme that quantifiable data ought not to be collected and that cost-benefit analysis either should not take place or should not be based on quantitative data or techniques. What is recommended is that a cost-benefit approach be used - but one that is far simpler than ordinarily understood cost-benefit analysis.<sup>48</sup> Thus an overall judgement *should be* made on projects, on the

<sup>45</sup> For a simple explanation of this technique see Armstrong and Bridger [1986].

<sup>46</sup> In their study of NGO projects, de Crombrughe *et al.* judge that only one out of the 32 projects they studied had data adequate to judge project efficiency, where efficiency measures the value of the tangible results achieved against the means employed in the form of a cost-benefit ratio. Brodhead *et al.*'s survey produced similar results [1988:102].

<sup>47</sup> They argue thus [1986:6]:

*A very high number of project proposals do not require sophisticated appraisal to reveal that they are seriously inappropriate or mal-designed. Most of these avoid even the cursory approach suggested . . . [here], because the presence of unquantifiables and the apparent difficulties of cost/benefit appraisal render them "exempt" from the rigours of economic appraisal in the eyes of the various parties concerned.*

<sup>48</sup> For a recent discussion of the inadequacies and gaps of cost-benefit analysis see Renard and Berlage [1990].

basis of assessing both the costs and benefits as obtained and as relevant. More specifically, it is proposed that:

on the merits of individual projects, on the basis of the data and time available and the questions which need to be answered, and in relation to the skills of the evaluator, judgements should be made resulting from an appraisal of both the costs and benefits which blend in, as appropriate, quantitative and non-quantitative data and information.

The onus is therefore on the evaluators both to judge which quantitative data of costs and benefits to obtain and to utilise it as appropriate. It is to be expected, however, that even if quantitative data are not given pride of place in the assessment, some data will be produced at least in the appendices of the Evaluation Report.

Even if the cost/benefit assessment is based more on qualitative than quantitative data, an important point to consider in the evaluation is whether, and if so in what manner, the benefit/cost balance could have been improved. The most obvious manner in which this could be assumed to occur is by pointing out either how benefits could have been improved or costs reduced. But it is equally important to examine a third scenario: the possibility that benefits could have been significantly enhanced by *increasing* costs. The context of this comment is that many NGOs pride themselves on having a reputation for keeping costs low. If, however, this is at the expense of, for example, failing to provide projects with adequate technical and managerial skills then it is in effect a false economy. As Brodhead *et al.* comment:

*In many cases, paradoxically, agencies will have to spend more if they wish to increase efficiency; for most, accustomed to working with limited resources, this may demand a considerable change in attitude.*

Finally, it is important to note that even in the narrow confines of cost/benefit assessment, care needs to be taken in drawing conclusions from projects whose costs are assessed to have exceeded the benefits. One also needs to obtain a sense of how this project compares with others - attempted by other NGOs, by official aid agencies and by the government itself. Equally, of course, this wider perspective is also necessary before coming to the conclusion that because the benefits of a particular project exceed the costs, the project in question can be deemed meritorious.

## V.7 Replication and Sustainability<sup>49</sup>

We can begin this particular discussion with the rather obvious statement that there would appear to be little point in discussing replication or long term sustainability if the

---

<sup>49</sup> Some writers use the term 'viability' to encompass what is here labelled 'sustainability'. Thus, de Crombrugge *et al.* [1985:11] use the concept of viability 'to assess the capacity of a system created by a project to sustain itself after the period of external funding.'

project is judged a failure. That said, it is also relevant to ask the extent to which **lessons of failure** are learnt by the NGO itself, and whether these lessons are passed on to the appropriate government and official aid agencies.

Setting aside the examples of failure, it should be acknowledged that the issue of replication of NGO projects is comparatively new. It is therefore more than likely that the question of replicability was *not* raised during decisions to initiate the project. Nevertheless, it is still possible to ask and ascertain the extent to which the project could be replicable either totally or with certain adaptations. One approach to answering this is to see if any particular features are unique. This could include the character of the implementing agency, particular problems of particular communities, or unique economic difficulties unlikely to recur. Additionally one can ask whether the project *needs* to be replicated - does it?

The issue of smallness is also likely to be of some importance: smallness could accentuate uniqueness, it could also provide support for the view that replication is possible. Yet the smaller the project the lower is going to be the overall impact of successive projects on a regional or national level.

Projects could also be replicated and scaled up. In this sense a particular project could be viewed as a pilot project, even if the NGO did not consider it as such on conception or even during execution. Pointers here would be, on the one hand, whether the government or official aid agencies know about the project and are interested in its results, and, on the other hand, whether the NGO has made efforts to spread information to these bodies or agencies.

Moving from replicability to sustainability (or viability), it is clearly far more reliable to assess this aspect after the NGO has withdrawn than during the early stages of the project when the NGO is still heavily involved. However even at this stage certain pointers can be used to judge at least **potential sustainability**. These would include the following:

- the degree of independent decision-making by the group;
- the extent to which the beneficiaries have been involved in initiating and executing the project (reflecting their identification with it);
- the extent of commitment they have to it in terms of their own resources and time;
- whether the activity of the project is central to their lives or more marginal;
- the participation of other agencies in the locality with the project;
- spread effects to other households or families;

- the ability to withstand minor or short-term disasters, or the ability to adapt to changes in the physical or even political environment.

The question of recurrent costs is an important one in this context. If recurrent costs are both small and a minor share of total costs then NGO withdrawal will have a relatively minor (although perhaps also critical) impact on continuity, especially if there are alternative sources of funding. And this brings in the wider context. Sustainability will be furthered if other local institutions of importance are supportive of the project, especially if they are willing to take over some of the costs.

This itself is likely to be critically dependent upon the nature of the benefits. If the project is attempting to produce benefits in a politically sensitive area which compete with those of other (probably more powerful) interest groups, then sustainability is likely to be threatened, especially if grassroots organisations are weak. If, on the other hand, the benefits produced are complementary to those of other interest groups in a locality where political activities are less intensive, then the chances of sustainability are high.<sup>50</sup>

All these various factors could be considered intrinsic to the project - that is, they could or should have been incorporated into the initial judgement about commencing the project. But there are other - extrinsic - factors which might also be influential.

Of major importance (at least in Africa) is the effect of changes in macro-economic policies on the delivery of services to, and the price of goods marketed from, different local areas. Often it is not the direct effects of these policies on a project which are important, but rather the effects that such policies have on the rest of the lives of the beneficiaries and therefore the impact that they have on the attitude and commitment of the beneficiaries to the project and its future existence and viability.

Another factor to consider here is the potential tension between short-term and longer-term results. It is likely that NGO projects - and their official counterparts - will be under pressure (perhaps severe) to show concrete results of their intervention in a short period of time: two to three years would be considered a *long* time. But as projects which are intended to have a major impact upon the poverty of the beneficiaries are also going to have a major impact upon their lives, they are bound to produce considerable upheaval in those societies. Two conclusions follow: one is that the time required for such projects to have a lasting (sustainable) impact is likely to be longer than a year or two; the other is that the short-term impact is not likely to be (at minimum) wholly consistent with the outcome that could be expected in the longer term. While it would be silly to suggest that there is likely to be an inverse

---

<sup>50</sup> An example of competitive benefits would be the production by peasants of hand-woven baskets which are to be sold in the nation's capital in direct competition with baskets made by labourers indentured to the local landlord. An example of non-competitive benefit would be a project which builds cattle dips, resulting not only in more livestock for the peasants but less spread of disease to the cattle of the local, wealthier land-owners.

relationship between short-term and longer-term impact, one needs to be equally wary of short-term outcomes that are either highly favourable or that produce particularly poor results. Unless there are clear reasons for such an outcome internal to the project, this would be signal both to look in more detail at the project context/environment and to examine further the 'pointers for sustainability' indicated above.

## VI. THE COUNTRY ASSESSMENT

However well carried out, discrete project evaluations executed in a manner similar to that described in the previous two sections are clearly not designed to answer important questions asked about the wider impact of NGO development activities. In particular, they are unable to answer questions about the effectiveness of NGOs as a whole in relation to poverty alleviation and raising the economic status of the poor across particular countries - even though they can certainly help to inform the discussion of these issues.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, it is unlikely that project evaluations constrained by time, resources and skills will be able completely to produce an accurate sense of the socio-economic changes which have been occurring in the locality or region in which these projects are situated, thereby reducing the ability of the evaluation to come to firm conclusions even about the manner in which the project itself has been the cause of changes in the economic status of the beneficiaries.

What this suggests is that besides project-specific work some broader sort of analysis needs to be undertaken which attempts to capture the more dynamic local, regional and country-wide trends in development, placing the role of NGOs in the context of nation-wide efforts at poverty alleviation, and especially in relation to the work of other agencies - other NGOs, the government and official donors - in their attempts to address these problems. For want of a better term, we shall call this the country assessment.

A number of NGOs already do their own country assessments which attempt to highlight the main socio-economic, and usually political, characteristics of the country. These are carried out to give those working in these NGOs (and their supporters) a better understanding of the context of their work, as well as to help understand better the role that different NGOs, with their own particular characteristics and objectives<sup>52</sup>, might play through more direct project and programme work or through channelling resources to southern NGOs. While such assessments greatly help to locate the work of particular NGOs in the broader context, there are a number of weaknesses - well recognised by the NGOs themselves. By no means have all countries in which NGOs work been the subject of substantive country assessments, and most NGOs do not undertake or commission such analyses. On the other hand, most NGOs do carry out some sort of country review; these tend to be of varying length, some of only a couple of pages, and varying quality. The common theme of these reports tends to be the work of the particular NGO rather than attempts to focus these efforts in a broader context. Where the broader contextual review is attempted there is inevitably

---

<sup>51</sup> Particularly in relation to the question about replicability of projects.

<sup>52</sup> This is complemented by development education work by the larger agencies, part of which is to provide analyses of the causes of and possible solutions to poverty in different countries and regions. Major analyses are undertaken by Cafod, Christian Aid and Oxfam.

considerable duplication between the different NGO reports of specific countries. This duplicates work, often undertaken without adequate in-house skills.

In this section of the Working Paper we outline a common framework for a Country Assessment, which attempts to cover the broader issues raised above and which should therefore be of use to NGOs, particularly those without the capacity to produce such assessments themselves.<sup>53</sup>

## VI.1 General Objectives

The general objective of the country assessment is to produce an analysis of the country which places the role of NGOs in the context of local, regional and national attempts to address the problems of poverty, its alleviation and eventual elimination. The assessment consists of two distinct parts: the first (**Part A**) would comprise an analysis of the policies, achievements and failures of the government and official aid agencies in working to alleviate poverty; the second (**Part B**) would look at the present role of NGOs within this wider perspective.

More specifically, **Part A** would examine four major themes:

- (1) the overall extent and regional dimensions of poverty;
- (2) government's national and regional development and especially poverty objectives, the instruments it uses to achieve its objectives, its record in practice and the near-term prospects for poverty alleviation through accelerated economic growth as well as through other specific policies of government and government agencies;
- (3) national and regional gaps in poverty alleviating programmes resulting both from inadequacies of the overall government programme and from failures of implementation;

---

<sup>53</sup> As will become apparent, the task of drawing up and writing such an assessment is one requiring a certain degree of specialised skills, particularly those of development studies. Yet academic training in development studies is not a qualification particularly required either for working in NGOs (especially in smaller NGOs) or even for people in the post of country directors or co-ordinators, for whom the skills of leadership, communication and management are of particular importance. This means that such country assessments are likely to be carried out either by the staff of bigger NGOs or else by people, broadly with development studies skills, who are contracted to undertake such analysis. The financial costs of undertaking them need to be related to three factors - besides the benefits it is anticipated would accrue to the work and effectiveness of NGOs in different countries. First, that the costs would be shared among NGOs (and not only British NGOs), second that it would only be necessary to conduct these once and thereafter only to up-date them every few years or when major changes affecting poverty alleviation occur in different countries, and third, that the skills and time required for up-dating are likely to be far less specialised than those needed to produce a prototype country assessment.

- (4) the role of official aid agencies in poverty alleviation; national and regional gaps in *their* programmes resulting from inadequacies of their programmes and from failures of implementation.

**Part A** provides the context for analysis of the current role and impact together with the future potential of NGOs in poverty alleviation at the local, regional and national levels: **Part B**.

Here four broad themes need to be addressed:

- (1) a description of the range and impact of NGO efforts in poverty alleviation at the local, regional and national levels, and the extent to which present NGO projects and programmes fill the gaps of government and official aid efforts, or (where relevant) the extent to which they challenge the efforts of these agencies;<sup>54</sup>
- (2) discussion of the relative success of NGOs in helping to address the problems of poverty alleviation at a local, regional and national level through their own projects and programmes;
- (3) discussion of the potential for greater impact of NGOs in poverty alleviation, either through replication of existing projects or through new or different initiatives; listing of the major impediments and their potential for being addressed;
- (4) discussion of the manner in which the work, first, of different NGOs is co-ordinated within the NGO 'community' and, second, the extent to which the work of NGOs as a whole is co-ordinated with official and government agencies; proposals for new or different NGO initiatives emerging from the above analysis and the prospects for and problems of greater co-ordination in the future.

It is far easier for the country assessment than for the diverse range of particular NGO projects to draw up a check-list of more specific questions to raise or of particular types of data which assessors might attempt to gather in order to provide answers to the questions raised above. The remainder of this section therefore addresses each of the different issues in more detail by means of such a check-list, following the order of the eight questions and issues referred to above.

---

<sup>54</sup> One should not be optimistic at this stage of country assessments, which will indicate a major and significant impact of NGOs. Following an evaluation of some 90 NGO projects across the developing world, Schneider comments [1988:202]:

*In the light of the findings of our study it is obvious that rural development remains essentially a prerogative of government even though NGOs may be able to influence opinion, lobby in favour of the interests of the poor and in some cases force the state to take urgent measures.*

## VI.2 Check-List of Specific Questions to Raise or Data to Look For

### Part A

#### (1) The overall extent and regional dimensions of poverty

Data to be obtained here would include the following: total population of the country, with best national aggregates of income and wealth distribution; rural and urban wealth and income differentials, regional differences with particular reference made to the problems and position of women.

Specific issues to highlight: numbers and proportion of population living in poverty; trends over the past five/ten years. Has the national or regional impact of poverty worsened or improved over this period? To what extent is it a problem of overall lack of assets or of an inequitable distribution of assets and jobs?

What are the characteristics of poverty? Relationship of poverty to employment, lack of physical assets such as land and credit, tribal or ethnic factors, housing, access to services such as education and health. The relationship of poverty to lack of democracy and democratic institutions. Comments on structural poverty and degree of destitution. Relationship of poverty to education.

For all data collected and utilised in the assessment it is important to give a sense of both the gaps and the quality of the sources. The quality of the sources from which this (and indeed much of the subsequent) information may be obtained will clearly vary from country to country. It is not the intention to attempt to gather any primary data for the country assessment, but rather to make use of those which are already available from official and unofficial sources. An important source would clearly be any similar country assessments which might have been carried out already, the nature and quality being influential in determining the time required for this particular assignment.

Thereafter the sources to be utilised could include the following: official national statistics and statistical trends; official studies of local and regional areas carried out by nationally-oriented or line ministries; research reports and evaluations of government projects, official bilateral and multilateral aid agencies (including, importantly, the respective co-ordinating United Nations offices), as well as the NGOs themselves; development planning reports; World Bank, IMF, regional bank and other institutions (such as the Economist Intelligence Unit) which have undertaken either relevant national or regional and local analyses of socio-economic developments and prospects; relevant studies and reports from the local universities and research institutions and of similar institutions abroad which have undertaken research and analysis in the country in question.

(2/3) Objectives and practice of poverty alleviation

This section would start with a summary of government's development and economic growth objectives, together with the institutions and instruments it has available to meet these objectives as they relate to poverty alleviation, giving the planned time-frame. It would also provide an overview of the general political, legal and fiscal framework of the country in question. Next it would comment on the extent to which they address the problems of poverty and where would the gaps be, if they were to be overcome. More particularly, what would be the impact of poverty at the regional level and where would the gaps be here?

Next the analysis would shift to the issue of direct intervention of the government and its agencies in the relief of poverty. Various questions need to be addressed. To what extent does the government rely on economic growth to address the problems of poverty and what specific additional policies have been outlined for alleviating poverty more immediately and more directly? Assessment of these programmes and comment on the gap between ideals and practice.

Next would come an assessment of what is likely to happen in practice. This would lead to a description of what would be a more realistic judgement of the gaps in poverty alleviation at the national, and hopefully regional, level with some assessment of the time-frame, separated into shortfalls of economic growth and shortfalls in specifically-targeted state programmes. The analysis might hope to identify and list the main problems both at the national level and at the different regional levels. At minimum, it should attempt to give examples of gaps in terms of economic issues (jobs, income/wealth distribution), social services and lack of them and also in relation to political questions and relationship between a lack of political power and perpetuation of poverty.

Answering the next set of questions would attempt to expose the causes of failures to meet targets. Is it possible to identify the extent to which failures of growth and poverty alleviating programmes have been due to internal and/or external factors. Factors of relevance here might be the following: the importance of international debt and repayments; the impact of structural adjustment policies and the realistic possibility of sustained levels of economic growth higher than rate of population growth. Internally the analysis would need to try to give a sense of the relative importance of economic failures, institutional failures and political factors (which need to be pin-pointed) in frustrating the effort to alleviate poverty at the national and, hopefully too, the regional level.

(4) Official aid agencies and poverty alleviation

At the macro-level this section would attempt to provide a sense of the importance of aid monies in government financing and in addressing problems

of foreign exchange and import scarcity. Next it would try to assess the importance and influence of donors in forming macro-economic policy. From macro-issues attention would be shifted to the more micro-level, giving a sense of the extent to which official donor money is channelled to poverty alleviating projects: identification of these projects in relation to overall problems of poverty and geographically in relation to regional problems of poverty. Estimates of the range of beneficiaries of official aid projects in relation to the overall problems of poverty.

The next set of issues to consider relates to the effectiveness of and problems with official aid. Questions to be addressed here would be the following. First, is it possible to provide an assessment of the impact of official aid in poverty alleviating projects both in relation to their own objectives and in relation to broader problems of poverty, and, if so, what are the lessons of this particular experience? Are the donors learning from these lessons, if so what evidence is there to show this? Are official donors open or secretive about their evaluations? What success have they had in replication of *their* projects, and if successes have been achieved have these made any difference to government approaches to poverty alleviation? To what extent have official donors co-ordinated their poverty alleviating approaches either among themselves or with the government? What are present plans in relation to both quantity of aid monies and amounts to be channelled to poverty alleviating programmes and projects, nationally and regionally?

## Part B

### (1) Description and range of NGO projects

The general task here is attempt to provide a sense (supported by quantitative data if possible) of the extent and involvement of NGOs in development in general and poverty alleviation in particular, separating out the influence and role of northern and southern NGOs. Do some NGOs dominate, why and with what consequence? Types of projects and programmes, in relation to poverty alleviation and types of intervention. Breakdown into economic, social and consciousness-raising projects and those that address specifically the problems and implications of gender issues. Is it possible to judge the range of beneficiaries of NGO projects in relation to the problems of poverty? Are the interventions of NGOs attempting to address poverty holistically or, rather, in parts - for instance by concentrating on improvements in isolation in relation to health, education, *etc.*?

To what extent does the whole NGO effort play a part in the overall national or partial regional effort of poverty alleviation, or is it marginal? Do the NGOs consciously work with the government and its agencies in a manner consistent with and aware of the aims and objectives of national and regional strategies, or are their activities distinct and separate? If so, why: what are

the reasons for this type of relationship? Do the NGOs work with each other to address either national or regional problems of poverty, for instance by sharing out projects, sharing experience of projects or publicising together the poverty problems in localities where they work? If not, why not? To what extent do NGOs and the government liaise in relation to design of projects, the place where projects will be located and the sharing of project experience?

(2/3) NGO impact and replication

This section would attempt to address the issues of project and programme success and potential for replication (by NGOs) or imitation (by government or official aid agencies).

Are NGOs successful in what they do, especially in relation to poverty alleviation projects or wider programmes? The assessment needs to attempt to move beyond project-specific results and obtain a sense of their achievements at the local, regional or national level. To what extent does the government know about the performance of NGO projects and programmes and with what result? Is there a mechanism for sharing information? If projects are judged successful, to what extent do NGOs try to replicate these successes? To what extent do NGOs share the information of success either with government agencies or with official aid agencies? What institutional arrangements exist to enhance this objective? What interest has the government shown in the development efforts of NGOs and incorporating their experiences (positive and negative) into their own programmes?

This set of questions is designed to obtain a sense of the effect that particular constraints, such as structural adjustment and other macro-originating policies, have had at the local level and therefore their impact on NGO projects and the achievement of objectives. Identify specific policies and attempt to trace through the effect of these on poverty and on an assessment of particular NGO project performance. Have there been regional differences and, if some areas and NGO projects have been less vulnerable, can the reasons for this be traced?

(4) Institutional arrangements

Are NGOs taken seriously by the government in their efforts towards poverty alleviation, what evidence is there to answer this question affirmatively? What institutional mechanisms can one identify to illustrate this? Do NGOs take other NGOs seriously: what exchange of information exists on analysing poverty and attempts to alleviate poverty? Do official agencies take NGOs seriously and what is the evidence for this? If there have been changes in these institutional arrangements recently, pinpoint their origin and comment on likely causes for change.

Are NGOs now or in the future likely to be a major force in alleviating poverty? Wherein lies their comparative advantage and is this being exploited to address the problems of poverty alleviation? What are the constraints inhibiting a greater impact of NGOs and what is needed to enhance their role.

What does the analysis say about the type of projects NGOs engage in or different types of relationship they could have to enhance their role and impact? Has the assessment told us anything about possible different approaches for NGOs or of a new role for different types of specialised NGO, which are currently not present or whose profile in the country in question is limited?

### **VI.3 Conclusion**

Clearly to attempt to answer completely and fully this listing of questions and issues would take many months of work, even if all the data and information were available. One of the symptoms of underdevelopment is that this type of information is simply not available, or available only in a very crude form. Thus it is quite clear that the actual country assessment is going to fall far short of the ideal. It is to be hoped, however, that an overview paper of 30-40 pages pinpointing the main issues outlined here, and including an earmarking of the major gaps in information and in analysis, should itself help to locate the place and role of NGOs in the national effort at raising income and addressing the problems of poverty.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Advisory Committee on Voluntary Aid [1988];** The Effectiveness of Private Voluntary Organisations, Washington: USAID, 1988 Report.
- Armstrong, G.A. and Bridger, G.A. [1986];** Cost Effectiveness: Appraising Projects with Non-Quantifiable Benefits, London: Crown Agents.
- Banga, L. [1981];** "The Project Approach to Rural Development: an internal critical view" Quarterly Review (of the Pan-African Institute for Development), No. 3, April-June, Douala, Cameroon:
- Barclay A.H. et al. [1979];** The Development Impact of PVOs in Kenya and Niger. Report Prepared For USAID. Norwalk, Connecticut: Development Alternatives Inc.
- Bardhan, P. (ed.) [1989];** Conversations between Economists and Anthropologists: Methodological Issues in Reassessing Economic Change in Rural India, Delhi, Oxford University Press.
- Bauer, P.T. [1984];** Reality and Rhetoric, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- Bowman, M. et al. [1989];** Measuring Our Impact: Determining Cost-Effectiveness of Non-Governmental Organisation Development Projects, Norwalk, Connecticut: Technoserve.
- Brodhead, T. et al. [1988];** Bridges of Hope? Canadian Voluntary Agencies and the Third World, Ottawa: North-South Institute.
- Campbell, P. [1989];** "Institutional Development: Basic Principles and Strategies", Geneva, International council of Voluntary Agencies.
- Cassen R. and Associates [1986];** Does Aid Work?, London: Oxford University Press.
- Castro A.P. et al. [1981];** "Indicators of Rural Inequality" World Development, Vol. 9, No. 5, May.
- Cernea, M. (ed.) [1985];** Putting People First: Sociological Variables in Rural Development, New York; Oxford University Press for the World Bank.
- Chalker, L. [1989];** "The Role of NGOs in Today's World" The 1989 Cecil Jackson Memorial Lecture delivered at the Commonwealth Institute, London, October (mimeo).

- Chambers, R.** [1985]; "Shortcut Methods of Gathering Social Information for Rural Development Projects" in Cernea [1985].
- Connell J. and Lipton, M.** [1977]; Assessing Village Labour Situations in Developing Countries, Delhi: Oxford University Press (prepared for the International Labour Office at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex).
- Conway, G.R. et al.**[1987]; "Rapid Rural Appraisal for Sustainable Development: Experiences from the Northern Areas of Pakistan": Paper presented to the International Institute for Environment and Development's Conference on Sustainable Development, April, (mimeo).
- Cracknell B.E. and Rednall, J.E.** [1986]; Defining Objectives and Measuring Performance in Aid Projects and Programmes, London: Overseas Development Administration, Evaluation Department, EV 384, August.
- Danida** [1989]; Danish NGOs, Report No. 1, Synthesis, Copenhagen: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department of International Development Cooperation.
- de Cromburgghe, G.; Howes, M. and Nieuwkerk, R.** [1985]; An Evaluation of EC Small Development Projects, Brussels: le Collectif d'Echanges pour la Technologie Appropriée (COTA), December.
- Edwards, M.** [1989]; "Learning from Experience in Africa", Oxford: Oxfam March (mimeo).
- Eichler, M.** [1988]; Non-Sexist Research Methods - A Practical Guide, London, George Allen and Unwin.
- Federal Republic of Germany, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation** [1986]; Learning From Mistakes: Findings and Conclusions, Bonn: Der Bundesminister für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit.
- Feuerstein, M-T,** [1986]; Partners in Evaluation: Evaluating Development and Community Programmes with Participants, London: Macmillan.
- Hayter, T. and Watson C.** [1985]; Aid: Rhetoric and Reality, London: Pluto Press.
- Howell, J. (ed)** [1980]; Borrowers and Lenders: rural financial markets and institutions in developing countries, London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Irvin, G. W.** [1976]; Modern Cost Benefit Methods: financial economic and social appraisal, The Hague: Institute of Social Studies.
- Korten, D. C.** [1990]; "NGOs and Development: an Overview Paper", prepared for the World Bank, Boston, Mass.: Institute for Development Research (mimeo).

- Krueger, A.; Michalopoulos, C. and Ruttan, V. [1989]; Aid and Development, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [1988]; Voluntary Aid for Development: The Role of Non-Governmental Organisations, Paris: OECD.
- Overseas Development Administration (ODA) [1988]; Appraisal of Projects in Developing Countries: A guide for economists, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Pretty, J.N. (ed.) [1989]; "Proceedings of RRA Review Workshop, Sussex", RRA Notes, Number 7, September.
- Ray, A. [1984]; Cost-Benefit Analysis: Issues and Methodologies, Washington: The World Bank.
- Renard, R. and Berlage, L. [1990]; "The Rise and Fall of Cost-Benefit Analysis in Developing Countries", paper presented to the EADI Workshop on Approaches and Methods in the Evaluation of Aid, Oslo: March, (mimeo).
- Riddell, R.C. [1987]; Foreign Aid Reconsidered, London and Baltimore: James Currey and Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Robinson, M. [1990]; "British NGOs and Third World Development", London: Overseas Development Institute (mimeo).
- Schneider, B. [1988]; The Barefoot Revolution: A Report to the Club of Rome, London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Silvert, F.S. [1990]; Knowledge Bank: A Model for Project Monitoring and Impact Assessment, New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).
- Swantz, M.L. [1990]; "Participatory Research and the Evaluation of the Effects of Aid for Women, paper presented to the EADI Workshop on Approaches and Methods in the Evaluation of Aid, Oslo: March, (mimeo).
- Tendler, J. [1982]; Turning Private Voluntary Agencies into Development Agencies: Questions for Evaluation, AID Program Evaluation Discussion Paper No. 12, Washington: US Agency for International Development.
- Tendler, J. [1987]; "Whatever Happened To Poverty Alleviation?", Report for the Mid-Decade Review of the Ford Foundation's Programs on Livelihood, Employment and Income Generation, New York: Ford Foundation, March (mimeo).

**United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) [1978]; Guide To Practical Project Appraisal: social benefit-cost analysis in developing countries. Project Formulation and Evaluation Series No. 3, New York: United Nations.**

**Widstrand, C. [1990]; "Evaluation and the Illusion of Knowledge", paper presented to the EADI Workshop on Approaches and Methods in the Evaluation of Aid, Oslo: March, (mimeo).**

**Overseas Development Institute  
Regent's College  
Inner Circle  
Regent's Park  
London NW1 4NS  
England  
Telephone: 071-487 7413  
Fax: 071-487 7590  
Telex: 94082191 ODIUK**