

Participatory Impact Monitoring of an NGO-managed Rural Development Programme Holalkere Taluk, Karnataka State, India

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Abstract

Impact monitoring remains a complex task despite the fact that development agencies world wide wish to conclusively assess how projects have affected development processes and benefited intended populations. Participatory Impact Monitoring (PIM) offers a 5-phase 20-step means of defining and monitoring both intended and unintended impacts periodically and self-responsibly. Its practical applications on an NGO-managed rural development programme in South India demonstrate the advantages and limitations of PIM, and the practicability of adopting PIM as a management tool.

Keywords : India, Impact, Monitoring, Participation, Rural Development

Despite the proliferation and increasing sophistication of management tools and methodologies, monitoring the impacts of development efforts continues to remain a complex task. Management focus up to now has been significantly skewed in favour of planning. Results, are usually measured in terms of outputs, sometimes, in terms of outcomes, almost never in terms of impact. Impacts are often difficult to measure as they are usually only assumptions at the time of planning, and thereafter, they have to be discerned and causally linked to the project activities. They are also often difficult to quantify, and therefore, to document credibly and comprehensively. Further, since there is a dearth of effective, timely, and practical methodologies to monitor impacts, it adds to the difficulty of assessing them. On the other hand, funds for development assistance have to be allocated between multiple claims, and development agencies world-wide are expected to justify how and to what extent expenditures have benefited the intended populations and to what degree their

efforts have affected development processes. Coming in this context, Participatory Impact Monitoring (PIM) is emerging as a useful methodology not only to estimate impacts but to assess them on an ongoing basis and to do so with the self-responsible involvement of all the actors concerned.

This paper presents both the general methodology of PIM and its practical application in an assessment of selected impacts of the Self Help Affinity Group (SHG) approach on an NGO-managed programme in rural south India. It, therefore, dwells more on SHGs than on other programme components where PIM can also be used to good effect.

The MYRADA Holalkere Integrated Rural Development Project (Holalkere Taluk, Chitradurga District, Karnataka, India) is a concrete expression of collaboration between MYRADA (Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency) an Indian NGO with rich experience in rural development, and Deutsche Welthungerhilfe (DWHH), a well-respected development support organisation headquartered in Bonn, Germany. The project is focused on promoting the wellbeing of socio-economically vulnerable rural families through their self-help and participation in planning, implementation, and management of development initiatives. Access to credit, and management of natural resources are the two core livelihood-related programme areas that have been taken up here. Management of natural resources is encouraged on the lines of watershed development. In credit management, the self-help affinity group (SHG) approach is adopted, pioneered by MYRADA initially to enable people to manage savings and credit, but increasingly fulfilling the objective of empowering people not only through their independent control of a pool of funds but more so through the process of building and managing their own institutions.

The introduction of Participatory Impact Monitoring in MYRADA was made possible when DWHH facilitated a PIM Team (from CATAD, Humboldt University, Germany) to explore its applications in Holalkere, with success. MYRADA Projects usually follow a comprehensive reporting

system to monitor project progress and the utilisation of funds. At the SHG level books are kept by the members themselves on membership details, minutes of meetings, savings, loans, repayments, etc. At MYRADA's level, the SHGs are monitored on the books they are keeping, the training programmes they have undergone, and other aspects of their growth and progress, in addition to monitoring the progress of other project activities and the utilisation of funds from the partner organisations. However, as far as the monitoring of project **impact** is concerned, what has been lacking up to now is observing, documenting, and critically reflecting on the nature of the impacts themselves, as against outputs and outcomes. It may even be necessary to admit that impacts have never systematically been considered as an aspect to be regularly defined and monitored. A few case studies written from time to time have illustrated impacts more as an *ad hoc* output than as a systemic need. In particular, MYRADA has not so far reflected on the need to develop indicators which allow a well-founded assessment of the project impact followed by plan adjustments and, possibly, the redefinition of project strategies.

The integration of PIM in the existing monitoring systems of the project aimed at enabling the project staff to overcome some of the above-mentioned deficiencies, and do so in a cost-effective and participatory manner on an ongoing basis. Apart from its direct use for project management, a second objective was for PIM to serve as a tool for learning and even to form the basis to justify continued project investments in certain strategies and activities. Hence, PIM has relevance to a wide range of implementing, financing, and supporting organisations as well as to the interested public.

What are impacts? What makes their assessment difficult?

In the context of development projects, impacts are generally understood as effects or changes caused by project interventions. They can be intended (planned, positive) or unintended (unplanned but imaginable,

positive or negative), or they may even be unexpected (positive or negative but hitherto not imagined as a likely fallout of the project's interventions by any of the actors involved). Some impacts – even of a single intervention - can occur fairly soon after the intervention is made whereas other impacts may take much longer to manifest. For example, the intervention of providing a loan to a poor family to increase income may result quite quickly in an increased workload for some of the family members; in the medium term it may result in increased income for the family; a few years later, the family may actually achieve more social and political power in the community as a result of sustained growth of economic power. Further, impacts may occur in several spheres and at several levels. For example, increase in income may be a 'hard' (tangible) impact whereas increase in social status may be a 'soft' (intangible) impact. The advantage of PIM is that it has the flexibility to allow the inclusion of any change that is considered important enough, even if not positive, even if not anticipated at the planning stage, and even if not precisely quantifiable.

The challenges to monitoring impact are mainly three : the highly aggregated level on which many impacts occur, the time lag between project measures and the perception of impacts, and the extent to which impacts can correctly be attributed to project interventions. While these three areas continue to remain challenges, the PIM methodology is pragmatic enough to permit the exploration of alternate strategies to reduce attribution doubts and establish reasonably definitive cause-and-effect relationships between project activities and impacts.

The two remaining words that make up PIM are : **Participatory**, which has been defined for operational purposes as a process in which directly involved actors monitor project impacts self-responsibly and exchange their results in a regular dialogue, and **Monitoring**, which, for lack of a more comprehensive definition, is understood here to mean a continuous and systematic process of observation, documentation, and critical reflection.

The methodological guidelines for PIM can be categorised into a total of 5 phases and 20 steps. The practical application of PIM in Holalkere also gave rise to the need to break each step into the following structural elements to ensure that the applied process was correct and complete :

- **Rationale** : Why the step is necessary
- **Output(s)** : What is the result of conducting the step (these outputs form the basis for going on to the next step)
- **Actors involved** : Who should be involved in conducting the step, and more importantly, who should not be left out in conducting the step
- **Procedure** : What is the best possible way of conducting the step so that the desired outputs are achieved
- **Checking questions** : Questions whose answers can confirm that the outputs of the step have been achieved, and that the process can now move to the next step

The phases and steps in PIM are as detailed below

Phase I : The Preparation Phase

This phase has 4 steps to it, at the end of which the expected output is a **meaningful** and **manageable** set of impacts to be monitored, decided upon by all the actors involved. As explained earlier, these impacts could be what were originally intended, as well as what were unintended but could be reasonably predicted as a likely consequence of the project activities. Intended (wished for) impacts are always favourable to the project partners (including the communities in whose interests the project is working). Unintended impacts could be either favourable or not. It is useful to reflect upon and monitor at least a few unintended impacts : if they continue to remain unfavourable in the long run, or if the negative impact outweighs the positive impacts, it reveals the need to rethink on project programmes and strategies (e.g. if a loan programme encourages a family to acquire a flock of sheep, the intended impact is increase in income (favourable) but the unintended impact could be that one child is removed from school to graze the flock (negative).

A second and equally important output from this phase is a common understanding of the meanings of the impacts to all the actors involved in PIM. The 4 steps in this phase, therefore, are :

1. Deciding on the programmes to be monitored
2. Identifying impacts of the programmes
3. Clarifying key terms and agreeing on the meanings of the impacts
4. Deciding on impacts to be monitored

Phase II : The Reflection Phase

In this phase the actors examine the background of the impacts selected for monitoring in terms of establishing causal relationships between the impacts and the project activities, and the likely contribution of external factors to the achievement of these impacts. A review of existing M & E (Monitoring and Evaluation) systems of the project is also undertaken in order to see how they can feed into PIM instead of being reinvented or duplicated. The steps in this phase can, therefore, be stated as :

1. Investigating the relations between project activities and the selected impacts
2. Investigating the relations between other (external) factors and the selected impacts
3. Examining the existing M & E activities concerning the impacts

Phase III : The Indicator Development Phase

In this core and most challenging phase of PIM, **appropriate**, **acceptable**, and **manageable** indicators are developed that deliver detailed descriptions of the impacts in order to assess them. All actors are involved in this phase, and particularly the people on whom the project activities are expected to have an impact, in order that there is agreement that the selected indicators do, in fact, confirm the occurrence of the impact. There has to be a focus on some degree of exactness in this phase : E.g. Level 1 : How do you notice that the income of an SHG member has increased? Level 2 : You say that a farmer would buy more

livestock if her income increased. How much more, and what kind of livestock would she buy? Level 3 : Can you say that an SHG member's livestock only increases if her income has increased? Level 4 : Why do you think that livestock is a good indicator of income? How can we convince others that this is a good indicator?

At this time, it is also necessary to see the achievement targets that the project had earlier set for itself, in order that the PIM is not more ambitious than the project's expectations.

Consequent to the development of indicators, this is also the phase in which survey units and sampling procedures are decided. Appropriate to each selected indicator, data collection tools and methods are elaborated as well as pre-tested to confirm if they are appropriate for use or have to be modified/refined. The steps in this phase, therefore, include :

1. Drafting indicators
2. Consulting all actors as well as other resource persons (if required) on indicator development
3. Selecting the most appropriate indicators
4. Defining survey units and deciding on sampling procedures
5. Elaborating data collection tools
6. Elaborating data processing systems
7. Pre-testing the indicators, methods, and data analysis systems
8. Determining thresholds and targeted achievements

Phase IV : The Measurement Phase

This is the 'practical' phase of PIM and comprises the actual collection and processing of data. There are only 2 steps in this phase and they are :

1. Ensuring the logistical arrangements for data collection
2. Collection and processing of data

Phase V : The Analysis Phase

This is the most demanding task in PIM not only because it has to ensure the correct interpretation of data but also because it has to enable recommendations and suitable corrective actions where required. The recommendations and corrective actions may be as much for the PIM process itself as for the project's future activities and strategies. The steps, therefore, include :

1. Analysing and interpreting the results
2. Drawing conclusions
3. Elaborating recommendations for future programming as well as monitoring

Application of PIM in the SHG programme at Holalkere

MYRADA's first exposure to PIM was experimental and, therefore, limited to the SHG programme. Ideally, PIM is an ongoing process that is best to be institutionalised in the project's monitoring systems. This enables the longitudinal monitoring of impacts. However, since this had not been done, and since the PIM team from CATAD could only spend 5 months to practically introduce the process to MYRADA, it became necessary to find alternate strategies to overcome some of the earlier mentioned challenges to impact assessment. It must also be mentioned here that the involvement of SHG members was not to the full extent in several of the PIM steps.

Self Help Groups as defined and promoted by MYRADA are small groups (less than 20 members) of poor women who meet every week on a fixed day and time, save money, take loans from their pooled funds, and strengthen their individual and collective status within their communities through a process of acquiring economic strengths, knowledge and awareness of life skills, management capabilities, and linkages with other institutions. MYRADA enables this process by encouraging women to organise, conducting regular training programmes

for them on a variety of practical topics, and influencing the creation of enabling conditions in the environment for SHGs to be respected and involved in the process of development.

At the time of introducing PIM in Holalkere (1998), there were 261 SHGs formed and functioning. They ranged from less than 6 months old to more than 5 years old. In order to incorporate a longitudinal dimension to the assessment and also in order to lessen the attribution gaps and enable more conclusive assessments, 64 SHGs (25% of all SHGs) were selected through stratified random sampling in 3 age categories :

- 1 year old groups (between 6 and 15 months old)
- 3 year old groups (between 33 and 39 months old), and
- 5 year old groups (at least 60 months old).

In view of the time and person-power resources available, interviews had to be restricted to :

- a minimum of 60 randomly selected respondents (20 from each subgroup, and not more than 4 persons from any single SHG) for individual interviews
- a minimum of 60 randomly selected SHGs (20 from each subgroup) for brief group interviews, and
- a minimum of 15 randomly selected SHGs (5 from each subgroup) for lengthy group interviews.

For the same reasons of time and person power, a control group of non-SHG members could not be included in the exercise.

Through an intense process of discussions, 6 impacts were selected for measurement that were compatible with the SHG programme goals, as well as practical and manageable. 1 unintended impact was also selected. Thus, there were a total of 7 impacts included :

1. Increased knowledge and awareness of SHG members
2. Development of individual skills of SHG members and members of their families
3. Increased income and savings of SHG members
4. Increased workload of SHG members (unintended impact)
5. Increased decision making power of SHG members in their families
6. Development of networks between SHGs and other institutions
7. Increased influential power of SHGs on community/village affairs

For the purposes of this paper, only one impact is being elaborated in some detail as an illustration of the PIM process :

Increased influential power of SHGs on community/village affairs

The following definitions were accepted : *Influential power* = the strength to affect the way something functions or develops (mainly by gaining respect). *Community* = a group of people living together in a common geographic area. *Village* = a cluster of communities in a geographic area. *Affairs* = activities leading to community/village development as well as problems hampering village/community development

4 indicators were elaborated to testify to the above impact, and these indicators were compatible with the project's earlier set goals as well as with the SHG members' aspirations :

- 1) The involvement of SHGs in initiating, planning, and implementing development programmes
- 2) The involvement of SHGs in maintaining village infrastructure
- 3) SHGs being approached to solve social problems in the community/village
- 4) The representation of SHG members in Local (elected) Bodies

Individual and group interviews using semi-structured guidelines, and interviews with non SHG members to confirm or dispute the veracity of

claims were the main means of collecting data. The results were discussed and accepted by all actors and were as follows :

Indicator 1 : The results could not be quantified since the SHGs varied widely in their involvement with regard to this indicator, with no discernible trends in relation to the age categories of the SHGs. Accounts ranged from one village where 4 SHGs had together involved in only 2 out of 9 programmes initiated in the previous year to another where 3 SHGs had implemented 10 out of 13 programmes. The extent of participation also showed wide variations : there were instances of SHGs proactively calling for village meetings to initiate discussions on certain village problems and find solutions, to SHGs getting involved in mobilising people to make a success of certain government initiated programmes (e.g. polio vaccinations), to villages where the SHGs became active only in response to encouragement from MYRADA. In several cases, the involvement of SHGs had been only to the extent of contributing money to some development activities and not in planning or implementing them.

Indicator 2 : The results showed a sharp increase in the involvement of SHGs on this indicator as they progressed in age and maturity. Since the indicator was further elaborated as 'Percentage of SHGs being in charge of maintaining atleast two village infrastructure measures (facilities)', the figures that emerged were 30% SHGs in the 1 year category, 65% SHGs in the 3 year category, and 90% SHGs in the 5 year category. Similar trends were shown in the number of such facilities maintained, with the average ranging from 1 infrastructure measure in the case of 1 year old SHGs to 3 infrastructure measures in the case of 5 year old groups. The types of infrastructure included drinking water borewells, community centres, school and community plantations, drainage systems, etc. In some cases the SHGs had themselves taken the initiative to mobilise and maintain the programmes; in others, the programmes had been supported from MYRADA in the expectation that the SHGs would maintain them.

Indicator 3 : This indicator was further elaborated as 'Percentage of SHGs who have been approached at least once by other groups in the village to help solve socially related problems'. The results showed that 25% of the SHGs had been approached in the 1 year category, and 50% each in the 3 year and 5 year categories. They had been approached spontaneously for problems ranging from alcoholism, lack of dowry, and wife beating to village drainage problems, the lack of teaching materials in schools, etc.

Indicator 4 : In its more detailed form this indicator was expressed as 'Percentage of SHGs who have elected members in one or more Local Bodies'. The results showed that 10% of the SHGs in the 1-year category had members who had been elected to other bodies. This increased to 25% of the SHGs in the 3-year category, and 55% of the SHGs in the 5 year category. There was also an increasing representation in the more important local bodies : in the 1-year and 3-year categories, approximately 40% of those elected were in *Gram Panchayaths*, Co-operative Societies, School Betterment Committees, etc. whereas in the 5-year category groups this had increased to 60%.

Conclusion : The indicator measurements on this impact revealed that though some of the targeted achievements earlier set by the project had not been achieved to the extent desired, the SHGs did show a clear trend towards having an influence on village/community affairs that increased with their age and maturity. On the other hand, organic links between indicators 1 and 2 could not be clearly established, which could mean that at least in the achievement of indicator 2, the influence of MYRADA was still quite strong. The performance on indicators 3 and 4 could be taken as a positive feedback on MYRADA's capacity building inputs into SHGs : members were gradually acquiring a stature in their communities where they were being consulted even by non-SHG members on social problems, and they were also acquiring the confidence and other required capabilities to contest elections and represent their communities on Local Bodies.

It is not the intention of this paper to comment on the SHG Programme but to comment on the usefulness of PIM itself. The advantages of the approach are several. It embeds critical thinking on impact. While it includes the assessment of all intended impacts, it also allows for the basket-of-impacts to be periodically reviewed and revised, and enables reflection on hitherto unforeseen impacts that only begin to be perceived in the process of implementing the project activities. It enables both impacts and their indicators to be defined in terms that hold precise and shared meanings for all the actors. It enables 'beneficiary' communities to be proactively involved in the process of estimating impacts. While most management tools do contribute to improving project steering, PIM does so through the consciously added dimensions of improving interactions between all actors, promoting learning processes, and promoting capacity building.

Nevertheless, these features do not make PIM the perfect answer to a difficult area of work. Impacts are not always easy to forecast and define; indicators are even less so. Where impacts and indicators are defined, there still remains the problem of designing the tools to collect data. To quote an example from Holalkere, one of the selected impacts was 'Increased decision making power of women SHG members in their households. This raised the question, "What kinds of decisions?". The decisions were then broken down into (a) decisions on the purposes for which loans are taken from SHGs, (b) decisions on the adoption of household infrastructure programmes (bathrooms, toilets, smokeless hearths, etc), and (c) decisions on the purchase of household articles. This then led to the issue of developing tools to collect data on the basis of which it could be gauged if women had really acquired the power to influence decisions. The final choice was a set of PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) type of tools. At the time of analysis, the fact that the different age-wise subgroups of SHGs - though coming from the same cultural milieu - had responded differently and in a clearly discernible pattern to the data collection questions had to be taken as a proxy indicator that the data collection tools had worked sufficiently well. Results

can therefore, at times, remain a speculative confirmation of the achievement (or non-achievement) of an impact. However, these are impediments that can be overcome with practice, experience, and sensitivity. In any case, it is not expected of PIM that it produces precise results but that it predicts correct trends in the direction of impacts.

For PIM to be used at its best, there has to be a realisation that it is not simply a methodology but even more, a philosophy. It cannot remain a one-off exercise but has to become a systemic feature of the organisation wishing to use it. This demands certain pre-requisites, the main ones being :

- (a) A stable administrative environment on the project
- (b) Good communication dynamics between the various actors
- (c) The willingness to invest in the monitoring of impacts
- (d) Commitment to the PIM process on a sustained basis by all actors (time, money, materials, etc.) as well as by the senior administrators who may not be directly involved but who have an influence on the working of the organisation
- (e) The building of experienced in-house facilitators

The acceptance of PIM as a philosophy implies a respect for all inputs that can contribute to the understanding and monitoring of impacts, and a commitment to enable the methodology to grow and remain dynamic.

Ref : Christian Berg, Kirsten Bredenbeck, Anke Schürmann, Julia Stan-zick, Christiane Vanecker (1998) NGO-Based Participatory Impact Monitoring of an Integrated Rural Development Project in Holalkere Taluk, Karnataka State, India : Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin