

Methods and approaches used in this Study

How should the Study's purpose be achieved, and what methods and approaches should be used? Initially, it might be thought that this would be relatively straightforward: use a comprehensive database in order to gather all evaluation studies, or, if the numbers of studies are so large as to be unmanageable, obtain and make use of a representative sample of such studies. A late 1996 search of the OECD/DAC

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database of evaluation abstracts for the years 1986 to 1997 recorded a total of 74 entries using the category 'NGO' and a total of 337 items using the keyword 'NGO' from a total listing of 6,341 entries. Discussions with officials from almost all donor agencies during the course of this Study confirmed the initial view of the researchers that this database was incomplete and partial, and thus that it formed a wholly inadequate data set upon which to make a reliable synthesis of the impact of NGO development interventions. Indeed, an early conclusion of this Study, corroborated repeatedly throughout the research period, is that an international database of NGO impact evaluations simply does not exist. What is more, the case study work confirmed our initial hypothesis that there is not even a reliable and comprehensive database of all NGO evaluation studies at the country level in any of the 13 donor/country case studies.

The method of gathering evaluation reports was initially to ask the different members of the OECD/DAC Evaluation Group to gather together and send evaluation reports focusing on the impact of NGO development interventions, and then synthesise them in order to summarise what they were saying about impact and methods of evaluation used. It was the view of the researchers that for all its merits, this approach to data gathering would probably be deficient both in relation to impact data and in relation to evaluation methods. Their experience and knowledge of NGO development activities suggested that relying on donor evaluation departments to forward reports to the researchers would:

- i. run the risk of omitting evaluations and related studies undertaken by official aid agencies but not commissioned by evaluation departments;
- ii. be highly likely to omit evaluations undertaken and/or commissioned by northern NGOs; and
- iii. would almost certainly omit evaluations undertaken and/or commissioned by southern NGOs and community-based organisations.

Additionally, it was the view of the researchers that such an approach would be unlikely to provide a rounded picture of methods of evaluation used to assess the impact of NGO development initiatives. This latter concern was rooted in the criticisms which have been voiced by NGOs of methods used to evaluate official aid interventions and, relatedly, because, in undertaking and commissioning their own evaluations, NGOs were unlikely to use methods of which they have been critical. Again, and as discussed in Parts B and C, these concerns were strongly reinforced in the evidence gathered in the country case study evidence.

As a result, it was decided that it would be necessary to try to supplement the data and information obtained from donor evaluation departments with data and information from NGOs within donor countries, and from NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) within developing countries. These data and information would focus both on evaluations of the impact of NGO development interventions and on evaluation methods and approaches. In short, the revised approach to be used aimed to gather data and information on impact and methods from three clusters of sources: from official donor agencies, from northern NGOs and from southern NGOs and community-based organisations.

The initial method of obtaining information from donors has already been described: it involved making contact with all members of the OECD/DAC Expert Group on Evaluation requesting them to send all relevant evaluation and related reports to the researchers. The initial request for studies and reports was supplemented in two ways: first by follow-up letters, and secondly by telephone/fax and face-to-face discussions

as and when researchers went to different countries.

The attempt to fill gaps in knowledge about impact and evaluation methods by contacting northern and southern NGOs had to be tempered to the time available for the study. The first phase of the Study involved reading the initial (donor-sent) evaluation reports and working out methods of gathering

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additional data as well as writing the Study's *Inception Report*. Thereafter it was decided that the main additional data gathering process would involve the following:

- making postal and telecommunication contact with NGOs and NGO network and umbrella organisations explaining the purpose of the study and asking them to send what they considered were important evaluation studies and reports, and examples of their own approaches to and methods of evaluating their development interventions;
- undertaking case studies in a selection of donor countries to obtain information on evaluations carried out and methods being used; and
- undertaking case studies in a (smaller) selection of southern countries, also to obtain information on evaluations carried out and methods and approaches being used by NGOs.

In selecting countries for the case studies, the researchers were faced with a choice of undertaking a comparatively large number of case studies, but devoting only a very few days to each, or undertaking far fewer studies, but undertaking a more in-depth study. As explained in the *Inception Report*, it was decided to undertake a relatively large number of case studies. In all, 13 donor/country case studies were carried out, more within donor countries (eight) than in developing countries (five). The case study countries are listed in Box 1.1.

Box 1.1: Country/donor case studies

Donors/donor countries

Belgium
France
The European Community
Finland
The Netherlands
Norway
The United Kingdom
The United States

Southern countries

Bangladesh
Brazil
Chile
Kenya
Senegal

The fourfold purpose of the donor-based country case studies was:

- i. To ensure that the donor-based evaluation studies sent to the researchers consisted of a complete set of recent donor-commissioned impact evaluations and, where necessary, to collect important additional studies.
- ii. To gather data on development impact from evaluations undertaken or commissioned by northern NGOs, focusing in particular on any synthesis, thematic or sectoral studies which might have been carried out.
- iii. To obtain information from NGOs on current attitudes, methods and approaches to the evaluation of development interventions.
- iv. To obtain data and information on linkages with southern NGOs in relation to evaluations undertaken or commissioned and interaction vis-a-vis methods and approaches.

The fourfold purpose of the southern-based country case studies was:

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- i. To gather data on impact from evaluations undertaken or commissioned by southern NGOs, focusing in particular on any synthesis, thematic or sectoral studies which

might have been carried out.

- ii. To obtain information from southern NGOs on current attitudes, methods and approaches to the evaluation of development interventions and, in that context, to assess the extent to which methods are influenced by northern or other southern NGOs.
- iii. To obtain information on the extent to which southern NGO evaluations are commissioned by northern NGOs vis-a-vis being home-grown southern-based initiatives.
- iv. To obtain data and information on self-evaluation activities of community-based organisations and the extent to which knowledge about impact and methods are shared with southern NGOs, northern NGOs and donors.

The extent to which the Study was successful in meeting these objectives is discussed in Parts B and C.