# Evaluation revisited. Conference in Utrecht, May 2010 Implications for NGO-IDEAs

On 20-21 May 2010 in Utrecht, a conference of 150 people took place on "improving the quality of evaluative practice by embracing complexity". NGO-IDEAs was one of the methods presented in the methods market. Cases and methods presented, and many interesting resources are available under: http://evaluationrevisited.wordpress.com. The cases mentioned below can be found here. The conference was organised because of the experience that many evaluations and monitoring systems do not address the complexity (see below for an explanation) of development "and existing approaches often fall woefully short" (from the flyer), that rigour (see below) is currently being defined very narrowly and therefore lots of funds for M&E are spent in a way that do not lead to better development interventions. The conference presentations will be posted on the same website.

Following are some personal reflections about the implications for NGO-IDEAs that I see from the conference and from the feedback I received on NGO-IDEAs.

1. A small group of peers assessed NGO-IDEAs and came to the conclusion that "it constitutes rigorous evaluative practice that embraces complexity", provided field workers have the necessary facilitation and observation skills and get an opportunity for peer reflection.

   Frightened? I'll try and translate academic jargon into plain talk: A few evaluators looked thoroughly at NGO-IDEAs and came to the conclusion that it is a monitoring system that can lead to self-evaluation and be a base for external evaluation of (complex) social change. If it combines PIAR and either SAGE or PAG, and under three conditions, such evaluation meets evaluation standards. The conditions are:

   - Field staff need to have (or get) the skills so that communities are enabled to express their genuine goals and assess them realistically.
   - Field staff need the skills to observe surprising developments, to identify the need to probe further, and to assess if people really express their opinions (and not just say what they are expected to say).
   - Field staff need to meet and exchange their experiences, so that they can increase their facilitation and observation skills and understand better what happens in the communities.

   If an NGO using NGO-IDEAs tools has an external evaluation, evaluators should critically look at the tool and check if these conditions apply. Then they can safely analyse these data. In conclusion: It was said that „NGO-IDEAs addresses complexity with simplicity." and that „external evaluation would make it more complicated, not more rigorous. Rather invest in the facilitators."

2. MAPP received great interest particularly around case 9 (PADEV) that takes a similar approach. We describe MAPP in the overview on Tiny Tools ("Impact-PRA"). It is a combination of Tiny Tools for evaluation and has a similar philosophy as NGO-IDEAs. In fact, it triggered the idea of Tiny Tools.

3. Sometimes working with retrospective questions can be better than working with baselines. We have seen this in NGO-IDEAs in the tool SAGE. One example: A group sets the goal that its members look after the health of their families. They come to the conclusion that 70 % do. A year later, after health awareness work, they assess anew and say that only 50 % do. From 70 to 50 %! Has the situation deteriorated? No. Standards and expectations have changed. People have understood more about health, and that they do not apply practices that they did not even know a year ago. The second survey could also have asked: "How many look after the health of their families now, and how many did a year ago?" This retrospective question would give a more accurate idea of the progress than the baseline does. I have learned at the conference that similar experiences are made in management training in organisations where they use similar methods of rating.

4. Many CBOs and NGOs use SAGE with yes/no questions. For instance they have the goal that each group member should be able to sign. But some can do much more than signing. How to

capture that? One way was suggested: After going through the yes/no question, the group could do a ranking: Who writes best? Who comes second? That would show the skills very clearly. Of course, this cannot be done with every SAGE goal but just with important ones.

5. Case 2 describes 7 steps in establishing a system from Planning through Monitoring to Evaluation. NGO-IDEAs will later in the year publish a manual on setting up impact-oriented monitoring systems. Case 2 can give ideas on how to reflect on planning in this, and its step 7 is about the regular revision of the system, which could also be good to think about.

6. The Institute of Development Studies in Sussex and Robert Chambers work currently on the numbers that people generate and how they can be made more useful for development. In NGO-IDEAs, too, people create a lot of numbers. We might benefit from ideas how people and NGOs can use these numbers.

7. There is internationally a concern about tendencies to promote mainly random controlled trials and similar methods for "better" impact assessment. People feel that methodology is narrowed down. There is a search going on for "better evaluation" that is based on values, meets standards and adapts its methodologies to the purpose of the evaluation (or monitoring). This discussion seems to be dominated by some countries in the Global North. Like in many cases, there is need for more Southern participation. But Germany, too, hardly seems to contribute to this international discussion although it could make a meaningful contribution because it still seems to be rare to use the PRA approach for impact assessment. The PRA approach is more than just asking grassroots for their views in interviews or discussions which does about everybody. It means that communities reflect systematically on the change they experience and its causes. This is at the heart of both NGO-IDEAs and MAPP.

Finally, for those interested in theory, some splinters:

**Complexity**

There are simple, complicated and complex processes. We need to adapt our development work, and our M&E to such situations (Patricia Rogers presentation at the conference).

**Simple**: Something that is well known. Cause and effect are well understood and what works in one case will also work in a similar case.
Example: If people build a traditional house, they need no external knowledge and can be sure that it will stand and shelter them.

**Complicated**: Something that experts can know, but it requires expert knowledge and the coordination of different experts to be successful.
Example: Building a bridge from Sicily to Italy (the biggest bridge ever built across a sea), is such a challenge that it needs the cooperation of many specialists from many countries. But with good plans, we can trust that it will hold when it stands.

**Complex**: Every situation is unique. If it succeeded in one case, that does not mean it will succeed in another case. What causes success will only show itself during the process. Relationships are key.
Example: Predicting when it will rain, how much it will rain, and where. Even the best experts and computer models fail. They can do it only short-term and are likely to go wrong. This is because weather itself has so many factors that react to each other in an unpredictable way. Farmers just have to prepare for the variations of rainfall and need to discuss their experiences with other farmers to make the right decisions. In the long run, with climate change, we also have unpredictable human influence.
Introducing saving and credit groups in a village is like predicting rain. We do not know who will make good use of it, who not or who will be alienated. Some groups might start taking social action, others not, they can develop lots of ideas what they want to change. Some decide to address alcoholism, others domestic conflict or water points, education or access to health service. We can only plan the start. We need to be ready for what comes then and go with the people's interest, or we cannot capture many of the opportunities that arise. We particularly need to be on the look-out for new ideas that people have and that we never thought of ourselves. If we do not, if we limit our M&E to a few pre-defined indicators, we will also have limited opportunities to be relevant to the priorities of the communities.

**Emergence**
has nothing to do with Emergency. In social structures (and ecosystems and other complex situations), new activities, desires, behaviours, conflict **emerge** without being planned or initiated from the outside. When something emerges spontaneously, we can often see that there is something very important behind it, and that it has power to bring change (or create chaos, if neglected). By definition, it is outside of plans (unless we plan for emerging opportunities).

In this context it becomes very important to build institutions (like groups) that show benefits, no matter which, to their members, and to develop trustful relationships. That will be the basis to deal with emerging developments.

**Rigour**
There is currently a lot of discussion in academia and evaluation societies about "rigorous impact evaluation". Many state that only quantitative evaluations with control groups, randomly selected, are rigorous, or evaluation designs that are similar. But rigour in social sciences means something completely different. Two definitions were proposed:

- "Scrupulous adherence to evaluation standards pertaining to utility, feasibility, propriety and accuracy as agreed amongst evaluation practitioners and commissioners" (workshop material) and
- "Evaluation needs to be systematic, empirical, sceptical and technically competent to be rigorous" (Patricia Rogers).

That means: not specific methodologies are rigorous. We need to know what we want to achieve, the purpose, and then use an appropriate mix of methodologies that meet the criteria for rigour.

**Conclusion of the theory:** When we work for change in societies, we work in complex situations where unpredictable new things emerge all the time. Currently, with logframes and pre-determined indicators, many organisations find it difficult to capture that. That is why we often see gaps between practice and plans, and why donors are frustrated because reports often do not capture important developments. Results Based Monitoring, unfortunately, is also mostly modelled on simple processes. Our every day M&E of NGOs needs to help us to understand better what is happening, so that development work becomes more effective. In NGO-IDEAs, all tools can be used to capture this. Rigour is relevant insofar as monitoring should genuinely try to get reliable and relevant data.

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