

1.1. Evaluating the Contributions of Development Actions to Social Change: Perspectives from the Social Sciences and Methodological Considerations

Philippe Lavigne Delville

Introduction

In this round table, my role is that of an academic, who starts by saying that everything is complicated, and then continues by recalling a number of points that will for some seem obvious, but which can be useful to keep in mind at the beginning of a conference.

Social change is a fundamental issue in the social sciences as much as in development, in both dimensions of the term: development as processes of economic, social, and political change in societies; and development as a proactive intervention that aims to institute certain types of change in societies. In fact, development interventions aim to bring specific changes. But what type of change? For whom? And what is social change?

The key is to think about the relationship between the process of social change and proactive interventions: How do development projects, which are focused on their own definite objectives for change, interact with, influence, and in some cases even counter, larger processes of change? How can we analyze and evaluate the contributions of such development efforts to processes of social change, and to “development” in general?

In this paper, I would like to elaborate on three points. First, I wish to question the notion of social change, which is often too conventional or ill-defined. Then, I will discuss the claims of development institutions that change can be generated or controlled, and also the structural tension that development interventions engender between the desire to provide support

to endogenous initiatives for change and the urge to restructure social realities following a prescriptive approach. Finally, I will address the issue of evaluation.

Social change or social dynamics?

In a prescriptive approach, social change is about “moving in the right direction” towards improvements in the living conditions of groups that are deemed as disadvantaged or otherwise insufficiently propelled into modernity. The idea is straightforward: the goal is to make the tools of progress (such as money, or techniques) available to local communities. In such a vision, people lack either the knowledge or the power (or both) to undergo modernity on their own, either because their traditions are too entrenched, or because they suffer from domination. They must adopt more efficient ways of doing things, and to do so they must become more entrepreneurial and individualistic. Change must be brought to them—or forced upon them if need be. In such an approach, change is understood to be unidirectional. Societies are supposed to go from tradition to modernity, from community to capitalism, along a linear path, with the double assumption that the processes of social change move in a pre-conceived direction, and that the impetus comes from outside. This approach is at the same time highly normative (there a one good way) and teleological in the sense that the path is already laid out; the goals having been determined from the outset.

In the field of technical change, few practitioners are still influenced by such a conception. We all know that techniques are not universal, but fit in given contexts. But how far are we from it when we discuss institutional reform? It is almost as if we had gone from imposing a modernization-driven idea of technical models to imposing prescriptive institutional models, with a discourse that boils down to: “Developing countries and communities in the South must adopt efficient institutions, markets, rule of law, neutral public institutions, and the like”. As Li (2011) says, the idea is to “render society technical”, in an apolitical conception of politics, with the underlying ambition of creating perfect citizens who are conscientious of the common good, active in decision-making processes, and committed to monitoring their political representatives, who themselves are publicly accountable. But citizens like these do not exist. The social fabric is far from neutral and consensual. It is itself made up of inequality, acts of domination, and of uneven power relations. Furthermore, some have even asked, “Is good governance a good development strategy?” (Meisel and Ould Aoudia, 2007). In other words, are we not talking about imposing models when we support economic development by way of institutions that are the very fruit of such development and not a prerequisite?

“Social change” as an idea is often bandied about in a general way, forgetting about the importance of asking, “Who is this change intended for? What is the agenda? Where is it heading?”. It is often part and parcel with a modernization-driven approach, which encourages change for the sake of change, and in which certain parties take it upon themselves to define the meaning and the “right direction” to move in. No society is static; social change is everywhere. Political organization, economic differentiation, and gender relations play themselves out in all different forms and intensities. And thus, even the absence of change needs explaining! As soon as we move away from a prescriptive, modernist mindset, what starts to stand out

are multitudinous, and often contradictory, social, economic and political dynamics. That is why social sciences refer today more to “social dynamics” than to “social change” in order to avoid reproducing a normative vision. Such social dynamics are at the interface of what Georges Balandier has referred to as “dynamics from inside” and “dynamics from outside”. They are the outcomes of the intentional strategies implemented by various groups to change their situation or to maintain the power relations that produce them, within the larger dynamic contexts of environmental, social, political, and economic change. Academics cannot apprehend the entire range of complex, multitudinous dynamics of change within a single analysis. Instead, they focus on one aspect or another according to their individual interests, the places, or the contexts.

Social dynamics and development interventions: the illusion of planned change

The goal of development projects is to institute change according to a set of pre-defined goals. In a technocratic perspective in which societies are relatively static, and/or in which technical change is a catalyst for social change, things are easy: development as a social process is part and parcel with development intervention. We all know, however, that that is not how it works: development projects are “interventions into dynamic systems” (Elwert and Bierschenk, 1988), made up of heterogeneous groups of actors who are engaged in social relations that are rife with inequality and domination as well as with solidarity. Their interests often conflict in their competition for resources or for power, their visions of the world can differ substantially, and they are at the mercy of other, much larger, processes of economic and political change. Consequently, the question begs to be asked: What is the meaning of a given development intervention for the different groups involved? What is at stake in local arenas?

What influence do interventions have in local arenas on local current dynamics, given the influence of macroscopic factors of change? Can a project aiming at protecting natural resources significantly reduce the problem of overexploitation, itself the result of demographic explosion and poverty? Can an agricultural development project overcome the negative impact of economic liberalization on peasant livelihoods? What can awareness campaigns about the effects of early marriage do to counter the dynamics of religious fundamentalism? Finally, what are the ways in which interventions are appropriated and interpreted at the local level?

The socio-anthropology of development has made it clear that projects are interpreted / appropriated / neutralized at the local level, according to the representation and interests of the actors concerned, the issues at hand, and the opportunities offered for capturing the resources brought by the project (Olivier de Sardan, 1995). The supposed “resistance to change” encompasses active strategies of neutralization of potential effects of interventions deemed inadequately adapted or dangerous—at least for certain actors.

Social change cannot be mandated. Development projects can only act and make lasting impacts if they fit with the agendas of (at least some) parties involved. They can favor or

encourage certain dynamics, but they can rarely create them anew or direct their course. The idea of programming social change must be done away with. We cannot keep thinking that the dynamics of social change and development interventions go hand in hand (Li, 2014).

Thinking that we can pre-define and control the effects of projects is almost an illusion. Development projects provide various resources—financial, technical, intellectual, political, symbolic (in terms of recognition, or valorization of certain actors or practices)—and try to put them at the disposal of certain people or organizations, who may or may not manage to make good use of them and include them in their strategies. In turn, the resources may or may not then be taken up or neutralized by others. Illusion of control is all the stronger when:

- Interventions refuse to admit this reality and are designed with a mechanistic logic;
- Interventions are conceived of too generally, according to a techno-centric and apolitical world vision, and without taking into account strategic groups, local arenas, dynamics, or existing power relations. For example, when one plans to support agriculture without asking which farmers to support, or aims to shift gender imbalances without being aware of the needs and wants of different types of women, of the cultural and economic issues behind their current position, or even of what is socially acceptable. Ignorance of the issues at stake on the ground, or the interests of different groups of actors (such as those who are able or unable to appropriate the project, or to neutralize it), prevents foresight into the strategies of the various actors, thereby submitting the intervention to a myriad of power plays;
- Interventions are designed as a succession of activities that are decided upon in advance, and must be implemented as planned, rendering them difficult to adapt in response to the different realities they encounter. Defining the objectives and the means by which they can be brought to term is indispensable. However, maintaining a too-rigid idea of what and how things should be done, held tightly within an intangible “logical framework”, is no solution either, because it becomes impossible to adjust to the various sources of uncertainty and adapt the project to the realities that are always more complex than what was initially imagined. Thinking in terms of logical framework implicitly assumes that once the diagnosis has been completed and the project deemed relevant, one can follow a foolproof plan and obtain the desired result. Such a method ignores the fact that permanent interactions are induced between local spaces and those of the intervention, and that projects are “voyages of discovery” (Hirschman, 1967). Most often, the fit between development action and realities must be built in the course of a project (Korten, 1980);
- Interventions are planned for a lapse of time that is incompatible with the desired goal. Change always requires a certain amount of time in order to settle in, but project time frames often make it impossible, with problems of continuity and coherence between successive stages. When financial support stops, the change-inducing processes are abandoned before they have been consolidated. This is often a cause of failure, because the actors whose interests are not served by the change know that it isn’t necessary to directly oppose it. Instead, they can just wait out the duration of the project, and when

the external participants are no longer present, everything just goes “back to normal”. Having already had a bad experience with projects that have suddenly been revoked, the actors who would have supported them lose confidence in the long-term effects of the interventions. They stop taking risks and simply remain in a position of perpetual waiting;

- Interventions over the past twenty years have become larger and more societally-based, in ever-shorter periods of time (three-year periods), and in ever-more rigid contractual conditions. A growing contradiction thus exists between the goals and the ability to achieve them... so much that one can wonder whether the increasing use of terms such as “contributes to” or “favors” in the logical frameworks do not indicate a certain level of renunciation of the intended goals as much as an acknowledgement that a development project can do everything by itself.

Not all projects share such rationale, of course, at least not at the same degree. The level of tyranny of a logical framework and the degree of bureaucratization in development project implementation depends on the institutions and the individuals involved. For a long time now, committed practitioners (in aid institutions, NGOs, and some private companies) have been promoting projects that try to accompany social dynamics, and they are self-reflexive as regards the limits of what can be done in a “project” (Lecomte, 1989). Projects that have had the most remarkable results are rarely those that were defined and precisely programmed in advance. The most relevant ones are those which are in sync with the local dynamics, and strategically provide certain actors with technical, economic, and symbolic resources, which rely on realistic analysis of the stumbling blocks and the issues, which have an allotment of time and funding coherent with the desired changes. Finally, successful interventions are cognizant of the various stakes in the issues they confront, and they adapt their actions according to the realities and problems they encounter. In so doing, they are able to bring about significant changes through technical and organizational innovations that enable certain groups of actors to renegotiate their place within the web of social relationships and the economy. The impact of such efforts may then be considerable: in Guinea, for example, the rice sector was streamlined and the place of women reinforced when parboiling was introduced; in Cambodia, the rehabilitation of the polders of Prey Nup strongly reduced the shortfall in rice production for poor families and made it possible for a farmers’ organization to represent the community in negotiations with the State.

Based on these findings, three broad questions regarding development interventions can be asked.

Once we agree that a given intervention plays most often only a limited role in larger dynamics of change, that its operational relevance is to be established with each new context, and that it is subject to various forms of re-appropriation, we have to admit that what we are “intervening in the dynamics of social systems”, something that is neither socially nor politically neutral. In such complex contexts, we have to strategically think over our temporary position within local arenas. We have to think about the kind of alliances we make with certain groups of actors when we give them priority over financial and cognitive resources provided by the project, in order to augment their ability to renegotiate their position within economic supply chains

and exert more power within local spheres. Every intervention has a prescriptive dimension. It contains visions of how things should be, conceptions of what should be done, and distinct ideas of what must be developed. But if they want to fit the realities and have positive impacts, project designers cannot make their choices only according to their own ideas or to the popular subjects from development conferences. They have to build on a sound analysis of local issues for the different strategic groups in the field. They have to accept the prescriptive nature of their work, all the while being reflexive about their legitimacy within social contexts and the politics of intervention. They have to find ways to set these things up for debate or negotiation with parties at the local level.

Project designers have to recognize and manage the tension between rationales of support (which entails setting up and taking hold of ideas, listening, flexibility, and an ability to take advantage of opportunities), and rationales of programming.

Reflections on this subject are numerous, especially as regards the strategic ways in which “logical framework matrices” can be employed (Neu, 2005). That said, I am not sure we have fully taken stock of the implications of these analyses on the design and the implementation of development projects. Despite the evolution of the aims (more societal) and of the strategies for implementing the projects (trying to manage complex, multi-actors processes), we can wonder whether we are not still adhering to a relatively mechanistic conception of interventions—and whether aid policies are not tending towards more rigidity (Lavigne Delville, 2013).

Evaluating the contribution of development interventions to processes of change: conceptual and methodological challenges

From the moment when we jettison the idea that the pre-planned actions will necessarily give rise to desired results, and when we accept the process-based nature of interventions, the issue of evaluation gets more complicated. Four specific difficulties present themselves:

1. It is impossible to grasp the entire range of dynamics that may be influenced by a given intervention. Every evaluation is partial, privileging certain lines of questioning, or objects, and runs the risk of overlooking the impacts it may have elsewhere. How can we define the right parameters and avoid making the mistake of barking up the wrong tree? (See Diagram 1). For example, whatever their technico-economic impacts are, development projects can have significant socio-political impacts, as organizations promoted by the project are arenas of political competition for leadership in local arenas. Local people with whom the project team has stronger relations can look for social or political legitimacy, and/or capture part of the allotted funds. If we want to avoid overlooking important aspects of the interventions that lie above and beyond the direct actions undertaken, we must ask ourselves questions about the overall impact on social dynamics that such interventions can have, and foresee both the direct and indirect as well as positive and negative influences that the projects can have.

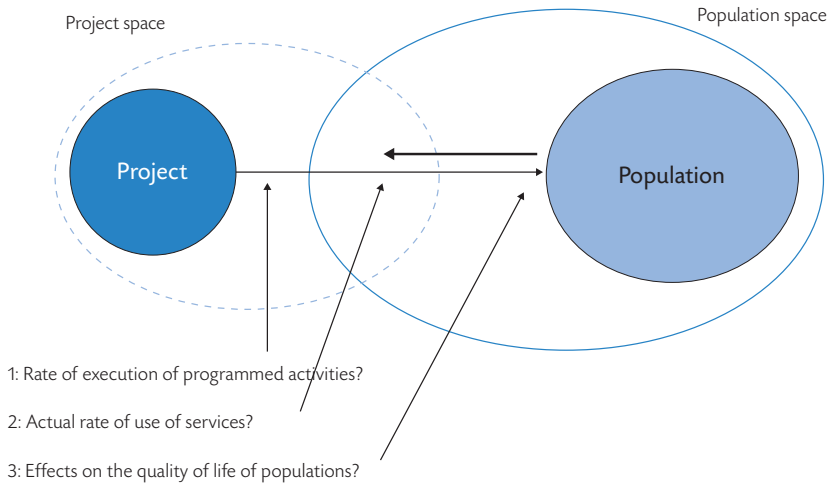
Diagram 1. Avoiding a narrow focus on project actions



Source: Billaz and Diwara (1982).

2. Observation requires the definition of indicators. Indicators tied to project activities are quite easy to define and to document, but they can restrict comprehension of impact and overall dynamics. On the other hand, impact indicators are more interesting in terms of understanding dynamics, but are difficult to document within classic processes of monitoring and evaluation. Regarding training sessions, for instance, it is easy to report the number of courses, the participants, their profiles, and maybe also the take-home message from the session. More difficult, however, is knowing what the collaborators may have remembered, what they have managed to put into practice, and whether or not it has had a significant impact on their professional or personal trajectory.

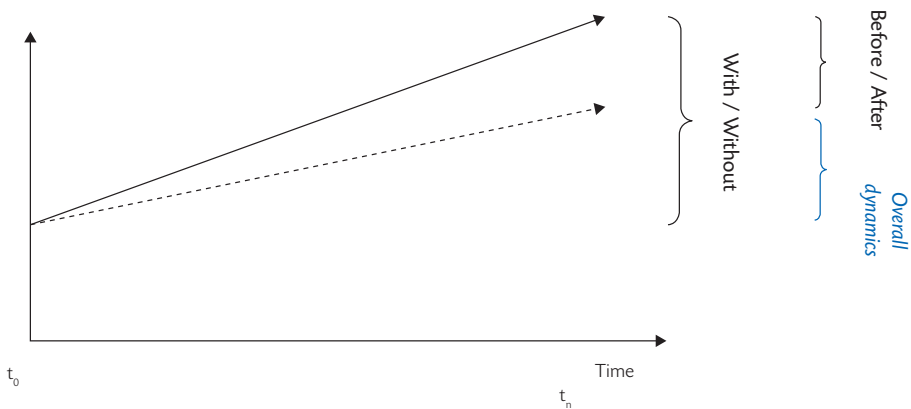
Diagram 2. What is observed?



Source: Lavigne Delville (2004).

3. Change is the result of multiple dynamics, of which development interventions only play a part. That is why comparing the situation “before project” and “after project” is unsuitable: the observed changes cannot be traced back to the development project alone. Ideally, a comparison between the situations “with project” and “without project” would be better, because it would allow us to identify the impacts of the project within the impacts of the global dynamics. But such analysis is difficult, due to the specificities of each situation, which makes it difficult to assume that “with project” and “without project” are the sole difference between them.

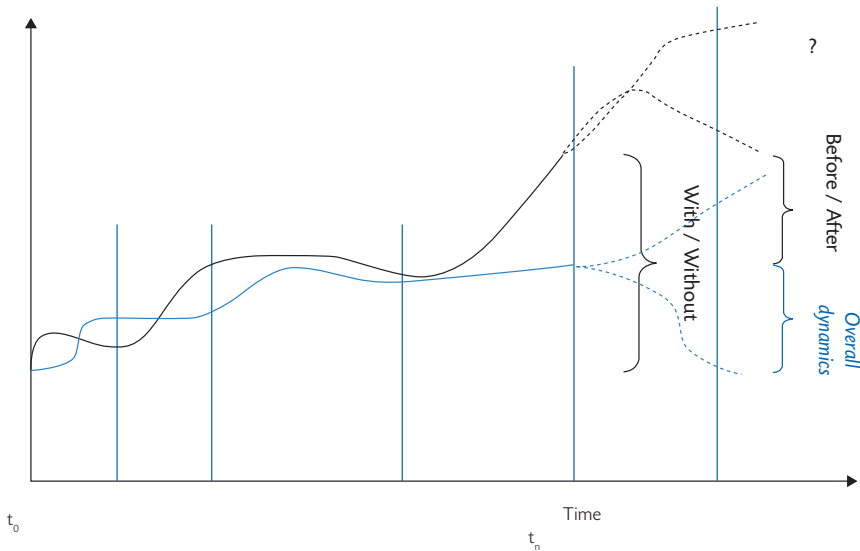
Diagram 3. Overall dynamics and project effect



Source: Lavigne Delville (2004).

- Change is far from linear. The moment of observation can influence the conclusions significantly, and future dynamics cannot be foreseen.

Diagram 4. Conclusions can vary according to the time when the evaluation takes place



Source: Author.

There is no ideal solution to these dilemmas. Rather, defining a monitoring and evaluation framework able to document change is a matter of choices and compromise as regards issues and tools that make sense in a given reality and within a given set of constraints.

Conclusion

Qualitative “process documentation” on the dynamics of change

Evaluating the contribution of development interventions to the dynamics of social change means addressing strong methodological challenges. Short-term assessment studies at the end of the project are hardly suitable for such an effort, especially if sound analyses of what happened during the project are unavailable. Focusing on participation and people’s perceptions of change is indispensable. However, it can be a trap if the required participation turns into a quick method that accumulates all the biases. I myself recall a participative methodology for impact study that claimed to analyze the effects of an agricultural development project on food security. During two days of workshops with people from the local community, there

was a focus group on agrarian change and on food shortage, followed by another on the evolution of yields and the role of the development project in the process. On paper, the methodology was very attractive. The local farmers had unanimously agreed that yields had increased. However, the footnotes of the report revealed the details of the activities that had actually been undertaken in the village by the project: it consisted of a series of stone lines over a few hundred meters, on a few farmers' fields—something that could not have had any impact on the food situation in the village! Clearly, community members sought to convey a positive image of the project to the evaluators for other reasons.

Consequently, there is no real alternative to sound social sciences oriented studies, using observations and a number of in-depth interviews to understand the dynamics of change, and to question the (intended or unintended) effects of the undertaken actions within them.

Such studies are inevitably heavy and difficult to systematize, especially if they are conducted after the project, and cannot use the observations and analyses collected over the course of the project. Furthermore, they are only meaningful if the timeframe they study is congruent with the dynamics of change themselves, which often requires looking at a succession of development projects or financial phases. They would be much more relevant if they could include preliminary analyses of situational dynamics and hypotheses of change drivers, and also use the results of monitoring and evaluation, documenting the various reinterpretations of the initial "project". In the case of the Prey Nup polder rehabilitation project, the monitoring process demonstrated the positive impact of the project on rice yields and production. Because this technical result was acknowledged, the impact assessment was able to focus on the effects of the project in terms of socio-economic differentiation (Lagandré, 2007).

When these kinds of studies are not undertaken as research projects, a lighter alternative exists: process monitoring and documentation (PMD). This is a qualitative approach to monitoring the dynamics brought about by interventions, which enables real-time follow up of the perceptions and strategies of the actors concerned, the issues at stake including the various points of view, and the reasons for their reactions (Mosse *et al.*, 1998). This differs from more classic forms of monitoring and evaluation, which provide only partial information, focused on activities more than on impact, and often too late to adapt the project activities or objectives.

Process monitoring can include real-time socio-anthropological investigations that are autonomous from but run parallel to the project, or socio-anthropological support to practitioners, in order to help them to better understand the dynamics of intervention. In any case, it involves observing and documenting the processes in progress, through a dialogue between practitioners and social science researchers—a dialogue that is often both difficult and productive—and is also better than analyzing dynamics after the project.

A real-time (or nearly real-time) sociological feedback system that accounts for how actions take place in the field and their subsequent perceptions and reactions by local actors would enable the strategic management of interventions. This field seems to be especially useful, though to my knowledge it has not been drawn upon in France.

For large enough projects, such a system could be set up with doctoral students in socio-anthropology as part of the monitoring and evaluation team. Having worked out their

theoretical framework beforehand, they would be able to conduct sound field studies with the dual goal of providing feedback to the project's team and thus contributing to real-time project management on the one hand, and of producing distanced analysis and synthesis of experience on the other.

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Analysis, Monitoring, and Evaluation of Contributions to Social Change

Meaningfully measuring international
solidarity and decentralized
cooperation

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COORDINATED BY

Emilie ABERLEN, Florent BEDECARRATS

Evaluation and Knowledge Capitalisation Unit, AFD

Charlotte BOISTEAU

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