

Participatory Assessment of Development Interventions: Lessons Learned From a New Evaluation Methodology in Ghana and Burkina Faso

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Abstract

This article presents the principles and findings of developing a new participatory assessment of development (PADev) evaluation approach that was codesigned with Dutch nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and northern and southern research institutes over a period of 4 years in the context of rural development in Ghana and Burkina Faso. Although participatory approaches in development evaluations have become widely accepted since the 1990s, the PADev approach is different by taking the principles of holism and local knowledge as starting points for its methodological elaboration. The PADev approach is found to have an added value for assessing the differentiated effects of development interventions across different subgroups in a community through intersubjectivity. Moreover, if PADev is taken up by a multitude of stakeholders, including the intended beneficiaries of development interventions and development stakeholders, it can contribute to a process of local history writing, knowledge sharing, capacity development, and providing input into community action plans and the strategies of community-based organizations and NGOs.

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Introduction

Development impact evaluations have gained renewed attention in the wake of development effectiveness debates and discussions surrounding the post-2015 development framework that will replace the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2012, 2013). The new Global or Sustainable Development Goals furthermore emphasize the importance of “leaving no one behind” (United Nations Association UK, 2012). The role of development organizations has been critically reviewed in light of this debate regarding their responsiveness to local development priorities and needs, including “voices of the poor,” and effectiveness to reach the ultra-poor. Participatory approaches in development have gained prominence since the 1980s (Brisiolara, 1998; Brock, 1999; Chambers, 1983, 1994, 1997; Cornwall, 2002; Cullen & Coryn, 2011; Estrella & Gaventa, 1998; Narayan, Patel, Schafft, Rademacher, & Koch-Schulte, 2000) and are being appreciated for bringing in stakeholders’ knowledge, cultural values, and experiences. Development organizations aiming to improve the impact of their projects are often turning to participatory evaluation designs that emphasize stakeholder involvement (Bamberger, 2000; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Daigneault & Jacob, 2009; Dietz & Zanen, 2009), preferring them over merely nonparticipatory qualitative and quantitative evaluation designs. However, empirical findings of participatory research are scarcely published. As a result, there is a knowledge gap in the participatory development literature on the analytical implications of research findings to broader issues of development.

This article presents the methodological principles and empirical findings of a research project that aimed to develop a method for a rigorous, holistic, and participatory assessment of development (PADev) initiatives, from the bottom-up. The perceptions of stakeholders, who were intended to reap the benefits of development interventions in Northern Ghana and Southern Burkina Faso, were taken as the test case for this approach: PAdDev. The approach is different from the dominant impact evaluation approaches in development studies. These commonly focus on single development projects or policy interventions, typically by the request of an implementing organization or funding agency, and apply a predefined approach toward *development* and the selection of external evaluation criteria. They vary by gravitating toward either a more quantitative (often econometric) or qualitative (often anthropological) method. When the preliminary findings of the first pre-PAdDev round were shared with a broader group of stakeholders, including government officials, funding agencies, and a group of evaluators in Dutch development organizations (Dietz, 2011), three Dutch development agencies (Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation, Prisma, and Woord en Daad) approached the project initiator to further develop the methodology in concerted effort with local stakeholders, including development practitioners, intended beneficiaries, and research institutes. The participation of beneficiaries as stakeholders in the evaluation primarily fulfilled conceptual, symbolic, and process use (see, e.g., Brandon & Fukunaya, 2014), apart from what can later become instrumental use. The area where research design and field-testing over 4 years took place was in Northern Ghana and Southern Burkina Faso, where these organizations had been active for a long time.

After explaining the methodology and underlying philosophy of PAdDev itself, we position the approach vis-à-vis existing impact evaluation approaches. The empirical findings from Ghana and Burkina Faso are then discussed, with the purpose to derive lessons learned for further use and implications of the PAdDev approach. The findings contribute to filling the empirical knowledge gap in the participatory development evaluation literature (e.g., Cullen, Coryn, & Rugh, 2011). The implications for instrumental use of PAdDev are critically discussed, in particular from the

perspective of using a PADev approach as input or driver of transformative change and steps into the direction of inclusive development. Finally, we conclude by pointing out PADev's limitations, points of improvement, and further use, not least in relation to existing approaches to development impact evaluation.

Explaining the PADev Approach

The PADev approach aims to answer two basic questions on development impact: (a) How do poor people themselves perceive developments and life changes? And (b) how do they assess the impact of development initiatives on their lives and the lives of others and in the context of wider changes and interventions in society from a long-term perspective (at least a generation)? The PADev approach is a participatory, bottom-up, and holistic approach to development impact assessment that assigns critical value to local people's knowledge, experiences, and cultural–ethical values. By stakeholder involvement *prima facie*, the PADev approach asserts that the quality of thinking and practice on local development interventions can be improved by engaging in a continuous discussion with the intended beneficiaries and broader group of stakeholders (program administrators, funding agencies, local leaders, ministries) about the formulated goals of the development intervention, the process itself, and outcomes realized (see also Dietz & Zanen, 2009; Roche, 1999). Stakeholder involvement has been defined by Brandon and Fukunaga (2014) as “. . . the participation of program stakeholders, that is, those who have a stake in the evaluation or its results, typically ranging from the beneficiaries, or recipients, of program services to administrators and funding agencies—in any phase of the evaluation” (p. 27). Participatory approaches in development impact evaluation recognize the poor as agents of change themselves, whom should be heard and included in local transformative economic, social–cultural, and political developments (Chambers, 1983, 1994, 1997). However, inclusive development strategies, currently advocated theoretically (Gupta, Pouw, & Ros-Tonen, 2015) and pursued at the international and national level throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Clements, Chianca, & Sasaki, 2008), have not yet translated into transformative local development on the ground. Including the excluded is one of the major challenges for development and poverty reduction on the ground (Champagne & Smits, 2008; Chouinard, 2013; Daigneault & Jacob, 2009). The biggest group of stakeholders in PADev are primarily the intended beneficiaries of multiple development interventions in a particular community. Unlike in other development impact evaluations, there is no preselection of programs or projects. As a result, “stakeholders” thus consist of a broader group of direct and indirect beneficiaries of present and past community-level development interventions.

At the heart of the PADev approach features a series of multiday participatory community-level workshops. In each workshop, 50–60 participants representing a geographic area (mostly district or subdistrict level) and consisting of different age and gender groups and community officials (village and religious leaders, administrators, teachers) assess the development history of the area and value the impact of each of the development initiatives that took place in that area, as far back as participants can remember (often one generation). The methods used to involve stakeholders (hereafter “participants”) in these workshops were through the following: (i) communication beforehand in selecting a purposive sample of community participants (location, gender, age), (ii) collaboration in workshop implementation, (iii) intensive interaction during the workshops, and (iv) *ex post* presentation and feedback of outcomes at community and subdistrict level including a broader group of stakeholders (development organization directors, ministries, district government officials, and community leaders). During the community workshops organized in Ghana and Burkina Faso, the following nine PADev modules (see Table 1) were implemented and field-tested in close collaboration with the participants.¹

Table 1. The Nine Participatory Assessment of Development Modules.

Module 1	Historical events	Developing a time line of major events
Module 2	Changes and trends	Describing historical changes in six domains
Module 3	Wealth classes	Describing characteristics of wealth classes
Module 4	Inventory of projects	Making an inventory of all interventions people experienced
Module 5	Assessment of projects	Assessing each of these interventions
Module 6	Relation between changes and projects	Finding which projects contributed to which changes
Module 7	Selection of five best and five worst projects	Selecting which projects were experienced as most and least beneficial
Module 8	Wealth group benefits	Describing which wealth classes benefitted from interventions
Module 9	Assessment of agencies	Assessing values of major agencies in the area

Note. Adapted from *PADev Guidebook* by Dietz et al. (2013).

Participants start with the history of events in their area (Module 1) providing five sets of memories of major events that occurred in their environment. They are being asked to go back one generation, about 30 years. In the second module, the participants use a framework for assessing causes of poverty and well-being (following Bebbington, 1999) to reflect upon the major changes in six livelihood domains: natural, physical, human capital, economic, sociopolitical, and cultural environment. In Module 3, participants categorize the local population in five wealth categories, from the very rich to the very poor, and give local criteria and concepts to differentiate between them.

In the next module, different subgroups then try to remember as many projects (policy interventions, private initiatives, nongovernmental organization (NGO)/community-based organization programs, etc.) as possible for their area, which can be everything that came from outside but also initiatives and innovations taken locally (Module 4). In Ghana and Burkina Faso, groups generally came up with between 50 and 150 different projects and interventions. Per project, participants are asked to give details, such as Who took the initiative? Who were the sponsors? Where did it take place and when, and in which sector? At the end of this exercise, the facilitators have a long list of different projects, including their major initiators. In practice, these included many central or local government agencies, sometimes sponsored by foreign donors (bilateral or multilateral), but also other types of agencies: faith-based or secular nongovernmental agencies, private/corporate agencies, religious groups, and private local initiators or community projects. The more recent projects appeared to be increasingly initiated by hybrid forms of collaboration.

In the fifth module, the participants do an initial assessment of each of the listed initiatives. They use a scale to judge the impact of a project in terms of usefulness, now (present) and then (when the project started). The scale runs from *very positive* (many people benefited), to *positive* (some benefited), to *not sustainable* (first there was some impact, but now nothing has remained), to *not implemented* (people know about the project, but in fact nothing happened), and finally to *negative impact* (this project should never have started; people resent this project). The comments made and reasons provided during the group negotiations are as important as the scores given. In the sixth module, people connect the major changes that were shared during the first day with the factors or projects that contributed to it in order to get a preliminary idea about explanatory mechanisms and the relative contributions of projects and other factors. The groups continue by selecting the “five best” and the “five worst” projects in their area (Module 7). The groups proceed with assessing the impact of the five best projects on the five different wealth classes (Module 8). Participants give a historical dimension to the assessment by repeating the assessment of the initiatives: What was the benefit of the project for each of the wealth groups when the project started and what is the relative benefit now? They do so by distributing 10 stones over the five wealth categories for each of the best

and worst projects they identified. This is methodologically the most complicated of all exercises, and it needs time and effort to derive people's judgments and the stories behind these judgments. After this exercise, in every group, a list of major agencies (government, NGOs, etc.) is derived from the list of projects. Each of these agencies is then assessed on a number of evaluation criteria related to their styles of management and operation (Module 9) that were conceptualized and applied by the participants themselves.²

Positioning PADev Vis-à-Vis Existing Development Assessment Approaches

A specific feature of the PADev approach is the holistic and participatory perspective from which the development assessment is done and which is built into the methodology, concepts, and evaluation criteria from beginning till end (Dietz, 2012). Most evaluations are done from the perspective of the intervening agency, the donor or back donor, and follow the causal chain downward to find effects at beneficiary (or recipient) level. This approach is useful when tracing the cost-effectiveness of development project-specific intended impacts by means of experimental and quasi-experimental techniques (e.g., Duflo & Banerjee, 2011). PADev explicitly approaches the causal chain from the other end—bottom-up. But instead of preselecting a specific project or intervention, PADev leaves the stakeholders in charge of identifying the projects and interventions they are able to recall or have knowledge about. In this way, the project or intervention is always considered in relation to other projects and interventions, which we believe makes PADev “holistic,” apart from being participatory and bottom-up. This provides more room for including social-cultural values, criteria, and norms for assessing what local people themselves interpret as “development,” thus contributing to a sense of shared ownership and responsibility (Dietz, 2012; Easton, 2012). Moreover, PADev includes different groups of stakeholders as more than one data source, in line with recommendations made by the participatory evaluation literature on development assistance (e.g., Rebien, 1996) as well as by the participatory evaluation literature outside development studies (e.g. see Brandon & Fukunaga, 2014; Jacobson, Azeam, & Baez, 2013; King & Stevahn, 2012).

Comparing PADev to other existing approaches in development impact evaluation can be done in multiple ways, in terms of design, method, project/program objective (e.g., empowerment), or process orientation. Here we adopt Stern et al.'s (2012) categorization for the UK Department of International Development since this is a common point of reference for international development impact evaluators. Stern et al. distinguish between six main design approaches: experimental, statistical, theory based, case based, participatory, and synthesis studies (see Table 2, Column 1). Among these, Stern et al. differentiate between specific variants of each approach (see Table 2, Column 2).

PADev fits closest to the “participatory” category as main design but can be seen as a specific variant because it is holistic (multiple interventions are considered), historical (going back in time at least one generation), while blending in elements of a “normative design” (focus on effects on the poorest of the poor) and elements of “agency designs” (collaborative action research). Validation takes place by the workshop participants if and how their actions and perceived or experienced effects, on themselves and others, are caused by the project or intervention under discussion (PADev Modules 4–8). PADev also contains elements of a “synthesis” design. On the basis of PADev Modules 1 and 2, on historical events and changes (see Table 1), meta- and narrative analysis is conducted of the history of development initiatives in the community and an assessment of development agencies in the community. PADev starts from stakeholders' living memory and aims to build a collective history. The systematic way in which historical information on development is gathered in combination with the discussions on why things happened leads to a comprehensive and collectively shared understanding (intersubjective) of how the current situation has come about and what role development interventions did or did not play. An intersubjective assessment of

Table 2. Design Approaches, Variants, and Causal Inference: Positioning Participatory Assessment of Development (PADev).

Design approaches	Specific variants	Basis for causal inference
Experimental	Randomized control trials Quasi-experiments Natural experiments	Counterfactuals; the copresence of cause and effects
Statistical	Statistical modeling Longitudinal studies Econometrics	Correlation between cause and effect or between variables, influence of (usually) isolatable multiple causes on a single effect Control for confounders
Theory-based	<i>Causal process designs:</i> theory of change, process tracing, contribution analysis, impact pathways <i>Causal mechanism designs:</i> realist evaluation, congruence analysis	Identification/confirmation of causal processes or “chains” Supporting factors and mechanisms at work in context
“Case-based” approaches	<i>Interpretative:</i> naturalistic, grounded theory, ethnography <i>Structured:</i> configurations, qualitative comparative analysis, within-case analysis, simulations and network analysis	Comparison across and within cases of combinations of causal factors Analytic generalization based on theory
Participatory	<i>Normative designs:</i> participatory or democratic evaluation, empowerment evaluation <i>Agency designs:</i> learning by doing, policy dialogue, collaborative action research	Validation by participants that their actions and experienced effects are “caused” by program Adoption, customization, and commitment to goal
Synthesis studies	PADev design: holistic, historical, bottom-up, focus on the poorest of the poor Meta-analysis, narrative synthesis, realist-based synthesis	Intersubjectivity Accumulation and aggregation within a number of perspectives (statistical, theory based, ethnographic, etc.)

Note. Amended from Stern et al. (2012), Table 3.3, p. 24.

development, what it is and ought to do and for whom, reaffirms the human being as a social being, who relates to others and its environment.

We believe this process prevents a myopic view of development interventions and allows for a more realistic (and lived) assessment of the relative importance of different interventions in bringing about community-level development and change. The recollected information is double-checked with development actors themselves to confirm the timing and scope of the intervention. The basis for causal inference is through accumulation and aggregation of different perspectives within the community (see Table 2, Column 3). This differentiates PADev from most participatory approaches. Instead of validation through individual subjectivity, PADev validates through intersubjectivity.³ The causal object of the assessment in PADev is determined by differentiated groups of participants through self-reported changes of the outcome of negotiated analyses and reconstructions of causal events and interventions. Pure subjectivity is thus replaced by intersubjectivity; that is, participant interaction rather than individual perspectives determines causal relationships. The assessment of “development” and what it should entail thus builds on the idea that people share a certain

collectively negotiated interpretation of development. Below is an example of a self-reported change, construed by workshop participants in Tô, Burkina Faso, in relation to a school building project:

The school building in Tô did not help to build the knowledge of the very poor when it first came, since they simply did not send their children to school as they thought the school was not even meant for them. But when the rains were too heavy and their house leaked, they would sleep on the veranda of the building and find shelter there. They still do this, but some of them now also send their children to school.

Bringing together the different group reports of important life changes is, of course, no easy task. When different participants present similar causal relations between interventions and effects with similar explanations of the mechanisms behind it, the likelihood that the causal relation may actually exist increases. Insofar as the causal reconstructions refer to the social domain, they are also powerful self-fulfilling prophecies: People acting as if the causal relation between an intervention and an outcome is true do actually help it to become true; that is, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, pp. 571–572). The PADev evaluators cannot be associated with any single intervention, which helps, in part, to overcome the social desirability bias in responses to evaluators. Discovering the complex interactions and multiple causal relations between the different dimensions in the development process (actors, interventions, livelihood domains, socioeconomic categories of people and time) shows the limitations of evaluation approaches that single out one specific intervention among many (Stame, 2010). The PADev approach shows that the “*ceteris paribus*” conditions in the real world are complex, multifold, and interrelated to other interventions, and they are factors that require in-depth understanding rather than controlling. In summary, PADev can be seen as a variant of participatory approaches (Stern et al., 2012), but with overlaps to the synthesis studies design approaches, as is illustrated in Table 2.

Findings, Uses, and Challenges

Development projects in the field research locations in rural Burkina Faso and Ghana were found to be mainly improving the lives of people who are locally considered to belong to (relatively) rich or middle-income groups and not to the poor or very poor. Reported improvements, for example, included the increase of educational and health facilities throughout rural areas, an increase in trade and markets, improved infrastructures (water and roads), new (foreign and regional) investors creating business in the area, and more employment opportunities for women. However, the poor and very poor did not manage to benefit from these changes. This is not only a result of deliberate exclusion by development agencies (or exclusion by default) but also due to the fact that the (very) poor are socially excluded by community members as well as self-excluded because of shame and mistrust (Kazimierczuk, 2010). As a result, the poor and very poor tend to remain “hidden” in development reports and statistics and are underrepresented in community decision-making and development interventions (Pouw & Janvier, 2014).

There are mixed feelings about the way democracy works, with more local involvement on the one hand and instability and infighting on the other hand. Local corruption has become more visible and is accompanied by sometimes violent exploitation of ethnic and religious differences. The perceived ineffectiveness of many district assemblies has also become a source of local initiatives. Almost everywhere there is an uneasy mixture of governance arrangements. Local chiefs are still quite important, but formal government leaders are better educated now. Sometimes this goes together with a paternalistic, top-down mentality and with a state arrogance that is not appreciated. The very poor and marginalized are easily overlooked amid these changes. Physically

and mentally handicapped people (and also socially and emotionally handicapped people) and persons from minority groups are particularly vulnerable and form a disproportionate share of the very poor.

In the PADev workshops, the very poor proved difficult to draw in; specific efforts and tools need to be used to include them in evaluation exercises (Kazimierczuk, 2010). It is also difficult to get mobile (very) poor people to participate. This is true too for some of the very rich (who are often away on business) and for mobile poor. Overall, change agents primarily comprise government agencies and a wide variety of NGOs. The (very) poor are underrepresented as agents of change in all visited areas. The corporate sector is also not yet very visible, although some telecom companies have started to have an impact. Over the last 5 years, one has seen a fast hybridization of development projects in which government agencies; foreign donor agencies; foreign, national, and local NGOs; church and mosque-based agencies; the private commercial sector; and a variety of local community groups, sometimes backed by diaspora organizations, have started to form fluid networks of collaboration and joint involvement. In some areas (with Nandom in the Upper West Region in Ghana being the best example), an external development dependence attitude has given way to an entrepreneurial attitude, particularly among educated women and men. In the eyes of community participants, aid (foreign-backed innovations) has played an important role as a driver of change. This has generally been much appreciated, but particularly so when embedded in local agencies and practices. People judge projects not only by their outcome (practical success) but also by the quality of the intervention and adherence to social values (respect, decent relationships, trust, and dependability). “Good” agencies are perceived to have a long-term commitment, take their time, dare to experiment, and dare to fail, and they are characterized as honest and dependable. They play broker roles (networking, knowledge exchange), commit to solving conflicts, and offer help when there are personal problems. They are flexible and can change from a structural to a more disaster-oriented approach when the need arises, as often happens in drought-, flood-, and epidemic-prone areas. “Bad” aid is an aid that is perceived as disrespectful, is top-down without consultation, and creates trouble without taking responsibility for solving conflicts. It is quick (hit and run) and looks for fast and visible success, which is often not sustainable. Bad aid does not live up to its promises and expectations.

The current emphasis in development agencies on visible success (effectiveness, impact) increases the chance of focusing on the locally rich and already successful people and on the “entrepreneurial” or “active” poor while failing to commit to the very poor. Moreover, in some international development donor circles, emphasis is put on “trade first; development will follow” (e.g., Ploumen, 2013), despite the commercial private sector still being very weak in some areas, like those studied in the PADev project. Despite recent rapid and substantial economic growth in both Ghana and Burkina Faso, this has not translated (yet) into local economic development beyond a limited number of small farmers and traders. The (very) poor are rarely seen as agents of change and development themselves, yet they play a decisive role in transformative local change (African Centre for Economic Transformation, 2014; United Nations Conference for Trade and Development, 2014).

Four years of experimenting with the PADev approach have revealed its relative strengths but also its challenges. The benefits of PADev for development agencies have been recognized, as it provides information that allows them to (i) realize their own impact vis-à-vis other actors, (ii) identify gaps or saturation points of development interventions in particular sectors or areas, (iii) gain insights into the most appropriate interventions in a specific geographic and/or cultural setting, and (iv) assess which interventions benefit which groups and why (e.g., gender, age, or wealth groups; Vlaminck, 2012). One of the main strengths of PADev—its ability to compare the contribution made by particular projects with other agents of change—also holds a limitation. Its broad scope inevitably reduces the focus on specific projects or interventions. For the purpose of meeting

Table 3. Typology of Local Change Processes Resulting from participatory assessment of development.

Change process	Participation-induced change ^a			Results-based change ^b
	Individual	Interpersonal	Collective	
Cognitive	Story of development	Peer learning (new farming techniques) Story of development	Story of development	Story of development
Behavioral	Chiefs starting to make minutes of meetings	Adopting new farming techniques Community support groups	Community meetings	Community action plans

Note. Adapted from Vlaminc (2012), Table 1, p. 2.

^aParticipation-induced change is the capacity of an evaluation process to affect stakeholders and the entity that is being evaluated. ^bResults-based change encompasses the instrumental, cognitive, and political use of any information associated with the outcome of evaluations.

donor requirements on evaluations, the evaluations of individual development projects serve a short-term purpose. For such ends, the PADev approach involves gathering too much “irrelevant” information. By contrast, if development agencies want to know their *real* contribution to societal change and desired outcomes such as poverty reduction, livelihood sustainability, food security, and better health, and if they want to learn how to improve their performance, the PADev approach is a suitable tool for starting a continuous discussion and revisiting their own “theory of change.” It can help agencies to discover their strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis other organizations, initiate hybrid arrangements, and discover niches and needs. Interestingly, in the cases in which this exercise was used, during the feedback with the collective of intervening agencies, a competitive atmosphere started to develop in which intervening agencies were clearly comparing the success they had in the eyes of the beneficiaries (opening up for downward accountability). Higher scores were now a source of anxiousness, achievement, and pride. This is a huge step toward a more client-oriented process of development, a process well-established in many Western countries, but shied away from in many developing regions.

From a beneficiaries’ point of view, the paramount question is how much do beneficiaries themselves learn from taking part in participatory evaluation exercises and what do they do with this? This was investigated by Vlaminc (2011) in four communities in Mamprusi District, Northern Ghana, as part of a parallel study to the PADev field study. Vlaminc (2012) identified four processes of local change that PADev contributed to, by changing community members’ cognitive skills or behavior (see Table 3). As such, PADev provides a practical tool for the much needed reversal of power over the process of development (e.g., Chambers, 1997; Dietz & PADev Team, 2013; Dietz & Zanen, 2009; Gaventa, 2006).

In this way, the PADev approach could be used to feed into policy development, at local and regional organizational and administrative levels, and contribute to more transformative change and inclusive development (Gupta et al., 2015). For example, the district assemblies in Ghana might be a good institution to take up the role of sharing the findings collectively with the development actors in a certain district as input in the design and implementation of local community action plans. In Burkina Faso, the PADev studies have become the basis for community development plans. However, further investigation of such potential cooperation and community action planning based on joint PADev evaluation outcomes is required.

The PADev approach is not equally suitable for all development projects or interventions. It is most suitable for assessing medium- to long-term interventions in areas where the development agency has been a relatively important player. To assess the impact of a short-duration, small-scale intervention, such as a single donation of medical equipment to a local clinic in a certain region, experimental and statistical approaches may be preferable. And when the specific working

mechanisms of one particular intervention are the main focus of interest, theory-based approaches would be more suitable.

In areas where people have experienced trauma, the method requires special (psychological) care and handling. These difficulties cause potential bias in PAdEv, as they also would cause potential bias in existing evaluation approaches. Moreover, PAdEv can function as a complement to experimental and statistical approaches that may measure differentiated effects on different wealth categories, as PAdEv can look for an explanation. Elements of PAdEv can be used to give development agencies a tool in their hands to reflect critically on their own intervention as an interactive and intercultural process of learning.

Finally, the PAdEv approach also has some practical challenges that require attention. The first challenge involves human capital. To successfully conduct PAdEv-style workshops and attain high quality, it is important to have a group of facilitators who are well introduced in the local language and culture, acquainted with participatory research methods, and not linked directly to government agencies or local NGOs. Teaming up with a regional research institute is probably the best way to address this challenge. A second challenge involves the level of factual knowledge that workshop participants have about development projects. For instance, in the case of interventions that result from partnerships between local, national, and/or international development agencies, participants often know the organization that directly works with them, but they may not know the back donors. Similarly, participants tend to have difficulties knowing exact years in which projects were implemented or concluded. An effective way to address this challenge is to validate such factual findings with local development experts and documented sources.

A third challenge involves the selection of workshop participants. Selection can be purposive, for instance, aiming at local development expertise or specific groups in society, or random. In both cases, it is of utmost importance to reserve enough preparation time for selecting participants. In addition, it may be advisable to administer a short questionnaire among participants inquiring about basic demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. This information can be compared to local census data or other secondary sources to detect possible biases. A last challenge involves scale. The workshops in the experimental phase of PAdEv were mostly conducted in semiurban localities (small towns), with participants coming from the central place and surrounding villages. In the participatory evaluation process, most group members had shared knowledge about the projects they discussed (Dietz et al., 2013). This might not always be the case when the research area is larger and discussion groups more diverse in geographic, socioeconomic, ethnic, or cultural composition. This may also be the case when the PAdEv approach is applied in larger urban centers with less social cohesion. A recent PAdEv experiment in a neighborhood in Managua (Nicaragua) confirmed some of the difficulties but also showed that the approach is extremely valuable in a small urban neighborhood as well, as long as it is used in a flexible way and not in a prescriptive way (De Schipper, 2012).

Concluding Remarks

The outcomes of the field-testing of the PAdEv approach are both revealing and disturbing: Perceptions and criteria of “best” and “worst” interventions differ a lot, important life changes cannot always be attributed to single development interventions, and intended beneficiaries are often not reached (poorest of the poor). However, poor people are found to be perfectly capable of setting their own criteria of judging the quality and effectiveness of a development intervention by using both outcome and process variables, and they provide in-depth and contextually specific insights into causes of failure and success. Adopting new, multistakeholder (organizations and beneficiaries) evaluation practices could provide scope for enhanced ownership and control over development by the people whom it actually concerns the most. The PAdEv approach enables local people to assess their own development histories in an intersubjective manner, based on shared understanding

of development. Although the assessment was done collectively, it allowed room for category-specific reconstructions. The approach can be seen as a participatory, holistic, and bottom-up way of local history writing, but it can also be used for (ex post or impact) evaluation purposes and as preparation for new (donor) projects and policy input into community action plans. It includes local people and encourages local learning. It breaks away from short-term, context-poor, nonparticipatory, donor-oriented forms of evaluation that are so common in the development sector toward a beneficiary-oriented approach with the aim to turn them into change agents of a more inclusive development (Pouw & de Bruijne, 2015). And while the use of the approach depends on the purposes of the evaluation effort, using elements of it can help to deepen insights found through other evaluation approaches.

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Notes

1. To cross-check the backgrounds of participants (gender, age, region), all participants filled in a short survey with basic questions about themselves, their parents, their children, and their siblings (see Van der Geest, 2009, 2010, 2011) to validate the background of the people participating in the workshops. This strengthened the historical basis of the research and allowed us to ensure an appropriate level of heterogeneity of the sample.
2. All workshop reports can be consulted on the participatory assessment of development website as online documents as well as the primary data from all exercises of the 12 workshops (www.padev.nl).
3. Intersubjectivity is defined according to Thomas Scheff (2006) as “the sharing of subjective states by two individuals or more” (p. 858). This definition reflects the social and cultural embedding of individual experiences with development interventions.

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