
The Politics and Consequences of Including Stakeholders in International Development Evaluation

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Abstract

Participatory evaluation approaches have a relatively long history of advocacy and application in the international development evaluation community. Despite widespread use and apparent resonance with practitioners and donors alike, very little empirical research exists on why and how participatory evaluation approaches are used in international development settings. In this article, we present results derived from a mixed method investigation of a sample of practicing international development evaluators regarding their perceptions of how and why stakeholders are included in international development evaluations. Findings suggest that participatory evaluation approaches are interpreted and practiced in widely differing ways. Implications for international development evaluation practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords

participatory evaluation, international development evaluation, evaluation politics, evaluation consequences

Participatory approaches to evaluations of international development and aid programs first came to prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a direct response to international development programs that were seemingly mismatched to the needs of their intended beneficiaries (Chambers, 1992; Townsley, 1996). Including various stakeholder groups in the planning and evaluation process was believed to create development programs that both were better suited to these groups' needs and also more effective. Thus, stakeholders were not viewed exclusively as sources of evaluation data but also as important collaborators in the evaluation process. The adoption and recognition of participatory evaluation methods in international development represented a clear shift from what had previously been an almost exclusive focus on donor priorities to an expanded focus that included the

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views and values of both direct and indirect program beneficiaries, managers, service providers, and other relevant stakeholder groups.

Participatory evaluation approaches quickly flourished, and donors, international nongovernmental agencies, and international aid organizations such as Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), Heifer Project International (HPI), Peace Corps (PC), the United Nations (UN), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the World Bank (WB), among many others, soon advocated for and adopted their use. Many of these same organizations also developed detailed manuals and guides for evaluators that described how to design and execute participatory evaluation approaches and strategies (Aaker & Shumaker, 1994; Aubel, 1994; Chambers, 1992, 1994; Feuerstein 1986; Hall, 1981; Park, 1992; Rugh, 1986; Scrimshaw & Gleason, 1992; World Bank, 1996). Participatory rural appraisal, participatory action research, community-based participatory research, and asset-based community development are but a few participatory approaches that ultimately were developed to evaluate international development programs. (A complete comparison of the many synonyms sometimes used to describe participatory forms of evaluation exceeds the scope of this article. For a more complete comparison, interested readers are referred to Cullen, 2009.)

Presently, such approaches to and forms of evaluation are widely used in international development settings (Blue, Clapp-Wincek, & Benner, 2009). Despite their prevalence, however, there have been few empirical investigations that have documented the reasons for and the politics and consequences of including stakeholders in international development evaluations. Even so, there have been a number of studies on participatory evaluation approaches, largely led by Cousins (e.g., Cousins, Donohue, & Bloom, 1996; Cousins & Earl, 1992; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998), the majority of which predominately have been limited in scope to North America and have dealt primarily with evaluations of educational programs (Brandon, 1998). What is more, participatory evaluation approaches are not uncontroversial, and supporters and detractors have widely differing views and opinions about their merits. Therefore, there is a clear need for research on participatory approaches to international development evaluations to either justify or repudiate their use or recommend ways for them to be improved.

Defining Participatory Evaluation

There is strikingly little consensus on what is meant by participatory evaluation and the range of approaches or methods that are classified as *participatory* vary widely. For some, participatory evaluation methods are those involving any type of consultation or interaction with stakeholders. For others, an evaluation is not truly participatory unless key stakeholders are actively involved in all stages of the evaluation. On a deeper level, participatory methods can be seen as both an expansion of decision making and, in some circumstances, an opportunity to shift power dynamics and promote social change (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). Given this ambiguity, there is a pressing need to clearly define *participatory evaluation*.

Cousins is one of the most prolific and frequently cited writers on participatory evaluation, and in his early work he defines participatory evaluation as “applied social research that involves a partnership between trained and practice-based decision makers, organization members with program responsibility, or people with a vital interest in the program” (Cousins & Earl, 1992, p. 399). From this view, participatory evaluation is premised on members of different professional communities working in partnership or a partnership between someone who is trained in evaluation methodology and those who are not. Others describe participatory evaluation as an overarching term for “any evaluation that involves program staff or participants actively in decision making and other activities related to the planning and implementation of evaluation studies” (King, 2005, p. 241). In both cases the definitions are so broad and operationally vague that specific stakeholder groups are not

identified nor are specific evaluation tasks detailed. In short, there is a lack of conceptual and operational specificity (Miller, 2010) as regards what represents “participatory evaluation” and what does not.

A Framework for Studying Participatory Evaluation

Given the prevalence of so many similar participatory evaluation approaches, having a reliable means by which to distinguish approaches seems necessary. Cousins, Donohue, and Bloom (1996) developed a widely cited framework for differentiating between types of participatory approaches that was subsequently developed by Cousins and Whitmore (1998) and later refined by Weaver and Cousins (2004). According to the original framework, all forms of participatory evaluation can be classified along three dimensions: (a) control of the evaluation process, (b) stakeholder selection for participation (i.e., which stakeholders are included in the evaluation), and (c) depth of participation (i.e., in what capacity do stakeholders participate?). Accordingly, participatory evaluation approaches fall somewhere on a continuum for each of these dimensions.

The current investigation used a three-dimensional framework for classifying participatory approaches that examines which stakeholders participate, in what capacity (i.e., how and to what extent), and in which phases of evaluation they participate. The first two dimensions are directly derived from Cousins and Whitmore (1998). Specifically, the first dimension directly addresses who holds technical control of the decision-making process (i.e., the evaluator, stakeholders, or some combination thereof). The second dimension describes the extent of stakeholder participation from consultation to extensive participation. The third dimension differs from Cousins and Whitmore in that depth of participation is described according to the principal evaluation phases in which different stakeholder groups participate. Here, this dimension has been decomposed into what are considered the most important, discrete facets related to the primary activities necessary to execute most evaluations (i.e., evaluation design, data collection, data analysis, developing recommendations, reporting of findings, and dissemination) in an attempt to more fully operationalize Cousins’ original dimension (see Cullen, 2009). (In retrospect, this operational definition also should have included “interpretation of findings” given stakeholders knowledge of local context that most evaluators are not privy to.) An oversimplified, conceptual rendering of these dimensions are illustrated in Figure 1 and are described more fully elsewhere in this article.

Consequences of Using Participatory Evaluation Approaches

The merits of participatory evaluation are debated. Morra Imas and Rist (2009) suggest that there are two primary objectives to participation and participatory approaches: (a) participation as product, where the act of participation is an objective and is one of the indicators of success and (b) participation as a process by which to achieve a stated objective. Most of the disagreement regarding participatory evaluation approaches stems from evaluations with the former objective. In other words, criticisms arise when an evaluation has an objective other than determining the merit or worth of something (Stufflebeam, 2001; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). In this article, the pros and cons of participatory evaluation approaches are described in terms of perceptions regarding positive and negative consequences of their use.

Positive Consequences

Weaver and Cousins (2004) argue that there are three main goals (which also can be viewed as positive consequences) of participatory evaluation approaches: pragmatic (because stakeholders are included in the evaluation process, evaluation findings will be more useful), political (including stakeholders improves the fairness of an evaluation), and epistemological (stakeholders have unique

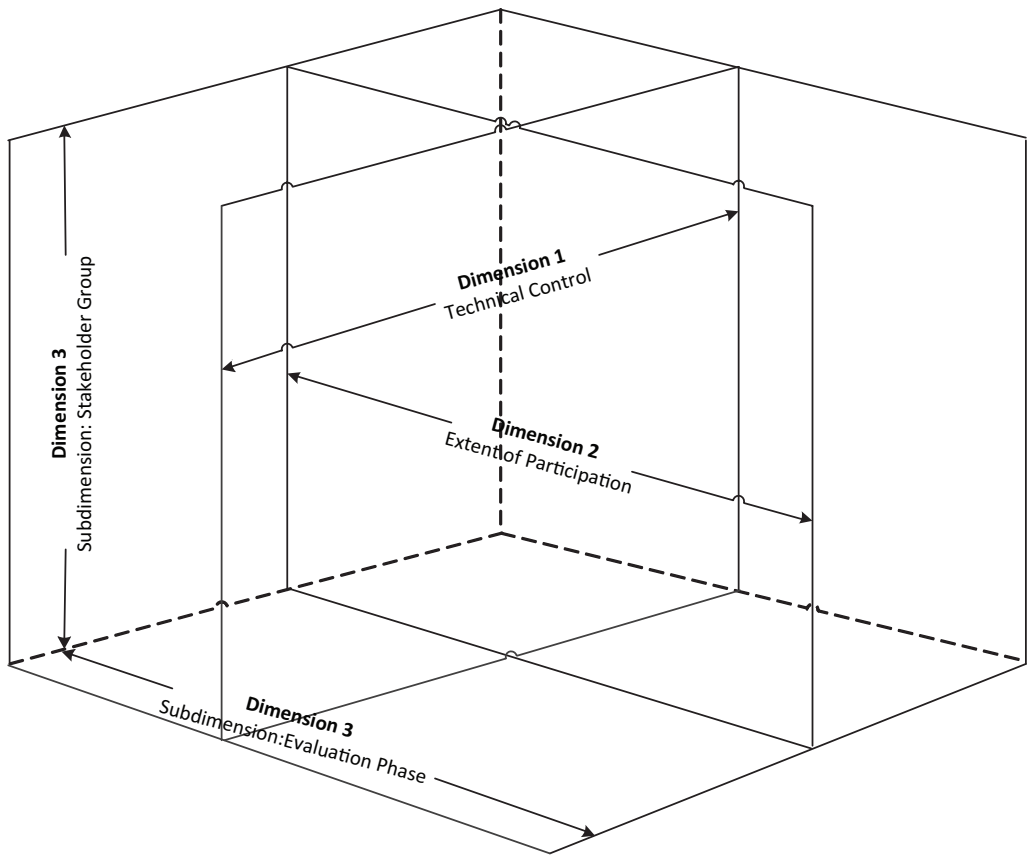


Figure 1. Framework describing participatory evaluation.

perspectives and their inclusion improves the validity of an evaluation). Some argue that the inclusion of a broader range of stakeholders in the evaluation process increases the use of evaluation findings (Brandon, 1998, 1999; Cousins, 2003; Patton, 2008; Ryan, Greene, Lincoln, Mathison, & Mertens, 1998; Weiss, 1986). It is held that increased use occurs, in part, because upstream stakeholders (see Davidson, 2005, for descriptions of upstream, downstream, and other stakeholder groups) are more likely to follow evaluation conclusions because their staff were actively involved in the evaluation process (Brandon, 1998) and because all stakeholders will be more committed to use findings because they have had a voice in the evaluation process (Weiss, 1986).

The second type of positive consequence of participatory evaluation approaches is increased fairness. As participatory approaches include more diverse stakeholder groups, such evaluations include the priorities of a larger group of individuals. This, in turn, leads to a more democratic evaluation process (Weaver & Cousins, 2004; Weiss 1986). Thus participatory evaluation approaches are considered more balanced and fair because the evaluation addresses the concerns of more stakeholder groups.

The third justification for participatory evaluation approaches, epistemological, is one of the most frequently cited reasons for their use. Namely, many evaluators believe that the use of participatory evaluation approaches greatly enhances the validity and credibility of an evaluation. Program stakeholders are aware of contextual considerations of which evaluators are not. Therefore, by including stakeholders in the evaluation process, the evaluation is more likely to identify important problems of concern (Brandon, Linberg, & Wang, 1993; Stake & Abma, 2005).

Negative Consequences

Despite these positive consequences of participatory evaluation approaches, there are potential negative consequences that merit attention. Examples of such problems include increased time and resource demands, difficulty managing multiple stakeholders, lack of stakeholder qualifications, stakeholder bias, and intervention disguised as evaluation. Including stakeholders in evaluations, for example, introduces the risk that stakeholder bias may reduce the validity of the evaluation and its findings. In other words, stakeholders' views of programs will drive the evaluation. If stakeholders have roles in the evaluation, their opinions, views, and personal motivations could influence how the evaluation is designed, implemented, reported, and disseminated. Such hidden objectives on the part of stakeholders potentially could jeopardize the validity of the evaluation. Chelimsky (2008) warns that stakeholders can introduce "loaded evaluation questions" wherein sponsors (upstream stakeholders) try to influence the focus of the evaluation. In such cases, evaluation findings are sometimes determined even before the evaluation is undertaken, thereby reducing the validity of the evaluation and its findings. Moreover, some critics argue that participatory approaches are essentially program interventions rather than evaluations (Brisolara, 1998).

Critics of participatory evaluation approaches contend that the inclusion of managing stakeholder groups might result in increased logistical problems. In these instances, the evaluation is hindered by "too many cooks in the kitchen" or, in other words, too many evaluation team members (program staff and nonprogram evaluation team members) which could result in personnel management difficulties. Other critics argue that participatory methods, through the inclusion of multiple stakeholder groups, result in increased time and financial burdens (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007).

Question Investigated in the Study

The following specific questions were posed to investigate practicing evaluators' perceptions of the politics and consequences of stakeholder participation in international development evaluations:

Why do evaluators include stakeholders in the evaluation process?

How have stakeholders typically been included in international development evaluations?

What are the perceived consequences of stakeholder inclusion in international development evaluations?

Questions #1 and #2 were intended to provide information on evaluators' reasons for including stakeholders in the evaluation process. Question #3 directly relates to the evaluation framework presented in this study. In other words, the role of stakeholders in the evaluation process is analyzed based on three dimensions: technical control of the decision-making process, extent of participation, and depth of participation by evaluation phase. The reader should note that the proposed participatory evaluation framework was not empirically tested. Rather, the framework helped guide the study, particularly how participatory evaluation was operationalized.

Method

Design

A mixed method sequential design, giving equal priority to both quantitative and qualitative methods, was used to investigate the primary research questions (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). The design was sequential in that the study's quantitative methods preceded and informed the subsequent qualitative methods (Morse, 2003). It was equal priority in that both the quantitative and qualitative methods and their results were assigned equal weight in the

interpretation of findings (Creswell, 2009). Ideally, mixed method designs reduce mono-method biases and provide greater insight into a phenomenon than a single method alone. In this study, the quantitative method consisted of a questionnaire to a nonprobability sample of international development evaluators and the qualitative method consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a subsample of questionnaire respondents.

(The study also included a systematic review and synthesis of a large sample of recently issued international development evaluation reports. However, this aspect of the study exceeds the scope of this article. Additionally, and given the nature and scope of the study, the results presented only partially reflect the larger findings; in particular those derived from the study's qualitative methods. Interested readers are referred to Cullen, 2009.)

Sample

For the study's quantitative phase, a nonprobability snowball sampling procedure (Patton, 2002) was used to gather information from practicing international development evaluators. Because an accurate and complete sampling frame consisting of all international development evaluators cannot be reliably constructed, identifying a known list of units for simple random or other probability sampling methods was not possible.

A total of 186 individuals completed a web-based questionnaire. The first item of the questionnaire was used to screen respondents, and asked them to indicate whether they had experience conducting international development evaluations. In all, 166 respondents (89%) responded affirmatively and the remaining 20 (11%) responded negatively and were directed to the final page of the questionnaire using a skip pattern and informed that their participation was not necessary.

Collectively, the 166 respondents who indicated experience in development evaluation had 1,357 ($M = 9.8$, $SD = 7.6$, median = 8) years of combined experience conducting international development evaluations and had conducted a total of 1,412 ($M = 11.0$, $SD = 13.0$, median = 5) unique international development evaluations. With regards to their country of origin, respondents were from 55 countries on 6 continents.

For the study's qualitative phase, a criterion sampling method (Patton, 2002) was used to identify interviewees for more in-depth data gathering than possible with the survey questionnaire alone. In all, 15 interviewees were selected from questionnaire respondents based on their demographic characteristics, including (a) country of origin and (b) experience conducting international development evaluations as well as their (c) experience including stakeholders in the evaluation process. Collectively, these interviewees had a total of 201 years ($M = 14.4$, $SD = 9.9$, median = 14) conducting international development evaluations and conducted a total of 188 ($M = 15.7$, $SD = 13.2$, median = 12) international development evaluations.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire consisted of 24 items designed to gather information about international development evaluators' perceptions of the politics and consequences of stakeholder participation in development evaluations. The instrument consisted of both open- and close-ended response sets, including, but not limited to, "select all that apply" items, semantic differential scales, and dichotomous items.

The questionnaire was divided into three main sections. The first section asked respondents how stakeholders typically participate in their international development evaluations, what stakeholders typically participate, and in what phase of the evaluation they typically participate. The second section of the questionnaire probed respondents about their familiarity and experience with participatory approaches to international development evaluations. Respondents with experience utilizing participatory approaches were asked to describe their experiences in detail, indicate what specific method/methods or participatory approach/approaches they utilized, detail perceived consequences

of their use, identify challenges encountered, present strategies for mitigating problems, and describe in which circumstances participatory approaches worked best. Finally, in the third section, respondents were asked to provide demographic information on their years of evaluation experience, regional, content area, and organizational experience, and country of origin.

Although the instrument was designed to gather information about participatory approaches in international development evaluation, the introduction to the instrument did not indicate so. Instead, the introduction to the questionnaire stated that the purpose was to study current practice in international development evaluation. Participatory evaluation approaches were specifically omitted in the introduction so as to reduce the number of respondents who would self-select out of the questionnaire based on their experience or lack of with participatory evaluation approaches.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed following completion of the study's quantitative phase and analysis to more fully investigate emergent themes and probe issues identified from the results of the questionnaire. Semi-structured interviewing was used because, while a structured interview has a formalized, limited set of questions, a semi-structured method is more flexible, allowing new questions to be raised during the interview in response to what the interviewee says.

Procedure

To recruit participants for the questionnaire, an e-mail invitation was sent to four professional listservs targeting international development evaluators: MandENEWS, XCEval, IDEAS, and EVALTALK. The snowball aspect of the sampling procedure was accomplished by contacting monitoring and evaluation departments of international development agencies (both donors and private voluntary organizations) asking them to recommend evaluators with whom they currently collaborate or those with whom they previously collaborated. In some cases, the agencies forwarded information regarding the questionnaire directly to collaborating evaluators. In others, the agencies provided the names and contact information of collaborating evaluators. The snowball strategy also was enhanced by including an item in the questionnaire asking respondents to refer other development evaluators to the questionnaire.

Data Processing and Analysis

Information obtained from the questionnaire was in both qualitative (from open-ended items) and quantitative (from close-ended items) forms. Close-ended, quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using traditional statistical techniques in the form of central tendency and variability rather than inferential statistics and null hypothesis significance testing due to the nature of the focal research questions, which were predominately descriptive. For qualitative data, text segments from open-ended questionnaire items and interview transcripts were analyzed using open and axial coding methods in order to estimate the prevalence of codes, assess similarities and differences in related codes, and to compare relationships between codes and other relevant information (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

Why Stakeholder Inclusion?

Almost half (45%) of all questionnaire respondents reported that using a participatory approach was the most appropriate for the contexts in which they work. More than one third (34%) reported that they always use participatory evaluation approaches. Finally, 17% of respondents indicated that their client specifically requested the use of a participatory evaluation approach and 4% did not know why it was used.

Questionnaire and interview respondents were asked whether there are particular circumstances in which participatory evaluation approaches appear to work best. There was a wide range of responses to this item that reveal the diversity in thinking and practice with participatory evaluation approaches. The predominant themes that emerged included:

Stakeholders included in evaluation process from the beginning. It is difficult to conduct a truly participatory evaluation when stakeholders are only brought on board at the later stages of an evaluation such as data collection. In this way, if stakeholders have an active role in determining what questions are asked to how the data are analyzed and interpreted, the evaluation findings will have more meaning for them and they will be more likely to use the findings.

Stakeholders involved in project being evaluated. If the program being evaluated is participatory in nature, a participatory evaluation approach would work well.

Donor support of participatory process. Having donor support, in terms of financial and time resources, logistical support, and commitments to the participatory process, is critical to the success of a participatory evaluation approach.

Conducive environment to participatory evaluations. For several respondents, this meant that stakeholder groups were on good terms and that there were no explicit, identifiable conflicts.

Sufficient time. This is particularly true for those respondents who reported that stakeholders need to be included in the evaluation from the beginning.

Participatory evaluation approaches are always appropriate. These respondents reported that stakeholder participation is not something that should be reserved for particular cases, but rather something that should be incorporated in all evaluations.

Flexibility. Including additional stakeholders in the evaluation process opens the door for complications. Some respondents commented on the need to have flexibility to respond appropriately to both problems and the additional complications of including more stakeholders.

Evaluation that is formative in nature. Several respondents reported that the stakes often are too high for summative evaluations to apply a participatory evaluation approach and that participatory approaches are better suited to formative tasks.

How Stakeholders are Included

Questionnaire respondents reported that the following stakeholder groups typically participate in international development evaluations: program staff (82%), recipients (77%), funding agency staff (67%), government (53%), nonrecipients who were positively impacted (30%), and nonrecipients who were negatively impacted (28%). Respondents also reported that program staff is the stakeholder group most frequently included in the evaluation process, and data collection is the evaluation phase with the greatest stakeholder participation. Conversely, nonrecipients who were negatively impacted were the stakeholder group least included in the evaluation process, and data analysis has the least amount of stakeholder participation.

Questionnaire respondents were asked to rate technical control of the evaluation process on a 5-point semantic differential scale with stakeholders at one end of the continuum and evaluators at the other. Respondents largely (68%) reported that evaluators have control of the decision-making process. Only 10% of respondents reported that stakeholders have technical control of the evaluation process.

Questionnaire respondents also were asked to indicate the extent of stakeholder participation in each evaluation phase using the example of their most recent participatory evaluation (see Table 1). As shown in the table, data collection had the highest average rating (3.82), followed by dissemination of findings (3.52) and developing recommendations (3.31). On the other end of the participatory spectrum, data analysis (2.57) and evaluation design (2.88) had the lowest average ratings.

Table 1. Extent of Stakeholder Participation in Each Evaluation Phase

	No Participation/Consultation Only		Extensive Participation		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Evaluation design	22%	23%	21%	15%	20%	2.88	1.43
Data collection	7%	7%	21%	26%	38%	3.82	1.22
Data analysis	30%	20%	24%	14%	11%	2.57	1.35
Developing recommendations	8%	20%	23%	31%	18%	3.31	1.21
Reporting of findings	18%	14%	24%	28%	16%	3.10	1.34
Dissemination of findings	12%	12%	20%	25%	32%	3.52	1.36

Table 2. Perceived Consequences of Participatory Evaluation Approaches

	Decreased	No Change	Increased	Don't Know
Usefulness of evaluation findings	1%	4%	93%	3%
Empowerment of stakeholders	1%	7%	88%	4%
Use of evaluation findings	0%	8%	88%	4%
Buy in	0%	5%	87%	8%
Fairness	5%	12%	75%	9%
Stakeholder's technical research skills	3%	14%	74%	9%
Validity	9%	17%	71%	3%
Time constraints	10%	17%	69%	4%
Social change	1%	12%	64%	24%
Other ^a	5%	11%	63%	21%
Financial constraints	13%	24%	58%	6%

^a Other responses included development of a culture of evaluation, accountability and transparency, and ownership, for example.

Consequences of Stakeholder Inclusion

Questionnaire respondents were asked to report their perceptions of the positive and negative consequences of the use of participatory evaluation approaches for development evaluations (see Table 2). Interviews probed further into themes identified by questionnaire respondents.

Positive Consequences

According to the questionnaire responses, the highest rated positive consequences of participatory evaluation approaches included increased usefulness (e.g., practicality/relevance) of evaluation findings (93%), increased evaluation use (e.g., findings are acted upon/used; 88%), increased empowerment of stakeholders (88%), and increased stakeholder buy in (87%). However, in interviews different positive consequences were identified.

In the interviews, by far the most frequently cited positive impact of participatory evaluation approaches was the perception that they increased validity. According to interviewees, stakeholder participation helps ensure that the evaluation uses relevant data and accurately reflects the needs of stakeholders, which some argue constitutes one facet of validity (see Messick, 1989). Stakeholder participation helps ensure that the evaluation uses relevant data and accurately reflects the needs of stakeholders:

We usually need to use participatory approaches in international development evaluation because most of the time, the programme design was done by technicians alone in their corner without having taken into account stakeholders' views. An evaluation is usually conducted either at the mid-course or at the

end of a programme so stakeholders' views are more than important in order to know what did really happen and why it happened that way according to those who lived the programme from inside.

Understanding the local context and stakeholders was identified as very beneficial. Taking the time to learn about local traditions and practices will help facilitate the evaluation process and facilitate greater stakeholder buy in:

There is an ancient Chinese proverb—When you are in the community do as the community. Eat like them, behave like them. When you go in consider it a learning process. Don't go and tell them what degrees you have. Don't act like you are smarter than them. Go thinking you will learn from them. Local people can teach you too. Give and take of knowledge.

Another positive impact frequently mentioned by interviewees was facilitation of the evaluation process. Interviewees reported that including relevant stakeholders often facilitated data collection and access to data, use and access to local resources, and reduced dependence on hiring external evaluation consultants:

If you bring people into the evaluation process the evaluation process will be greatly facilitated. There will be better data . . . in that it reflects what they think, more complete because they have a stake in the evaluation process. So, there will be less time spent in data management.

Evaluation capacity building was another positive impact frequently reported. Many interviewees indicated that participatory evaluation approaches help develop stakeholders' evaluation skills. Indeed, some interviewees reported that it was one of their objectives to help build capacity and that they did not care if they crossed the line with evaluation execution:

Participation enables stakeholders to assess the program results with various viewpoints and criteria. They see and hear the same things the evaluator is seeing and hearing which helps them come to the same conclusions and act upon the recommendations. Perhaps, more importantly, they learn how and why to do evaluations.

For a minority, participatory evaluation approaches also help resolve concerns such as fairness and transparency. They also indicated that participatory evaluation approaches directly and indirectly contribute to various forms of empowerment. For these interviewees, stakeholder participation in the evaluation process constitutes an ideological commitment:

It is a basic human right to be much more than a subject in evaluations which affect the target population's welfare. They live with the product. And it enhances validity, as well as their incidence in defining their own future.

Negative Consequences

The negative consequences of participatory evaluation approaches were the same for questionnaire respondents and interviewees. Interviewees reported that it takes time to bring all relevant stakeholders together and, in particular, to come to a consensus. However, such constraints were seen not only as negative impacts of doing participatory evaluation but also were regarded by some as actual barriers that precluded doing participatory evaluation in the first place. Indeed, several interviewees reported that time and financial constraints precluded the use of participatory evaluation approaches:

Many evaluations are slapdash and are usually put together as an afterthought. People just don't think about evaluation beforehand. They try to do too much in too short of a time period. The amount of time

Table 3. Challenges Encountered in Using Participatory Evaluation Approaches

	Not at all Challenging	Somewhat Challenging	Often Challenging	Always Challenging
Determining which stakeholders to include	21%	47%	24%	8%
Determining how stakeholders will participate	14%	40%	40%	6%
Power issues	6%	20%	49%	25%
Lack of stakeholder expertise	12%	31%	38%	20%
Time consuming	9%	17%	39%	35%

in the field is almost laughable. It is impossible to think that you could have any genuine participation of stakeholders in the evaluation process. The more people you include in evaluations, the more complicated it becomes. If you involve everyone in the process it takes more time and money.

Although reported as a positive impact, validity also was indicated as a negative impact of participatory evaluation approaches in some instances:

I do experience some criticism from people who are worried about reduced validity. But I try to go over the evaluation process with them so that they understand. Even if validity is reduced I think that it is worth the risk.

As shown in Table 3, even those evaluators who are strong advocates of and consistently use participatory evaluation approaches encounter problems when using them. More than one third of questionnaire respondents indicated that the time-consuming nature of participatory approaches was very challenging and an additional 39% reported that they were often challenging. As shown in the table, reconciling power issues also was considered challenging.

In both the survey and interviews, respondents reported that donors and clients sometimes impede the use of participatory evaluation approaches in that they try to control the evaluation by “cherry picking” stakeholders to participate, trying to stifle negative findings, and “overpowering weak stakeholders”:

Project managers and partners deliberately selecting community members and other stakeholders who have had favorable experiences with the project and will only say favorable things. Field coordinators not understanding or disregarding guidelines and not planning or implementing activities as requested (because participatory approaches are more complex than simply passing out surveys). They take shortcuts so as to simplify the process and compromise the integrity and validity of the evaluation.

As for time and financial constraints participatory evaluation approaches reportedly require significant time and financial resources in order to bring stakeholders together:

Harmonizing and aligning the different perspectives of a range of stakeholders is very time consuming—calling for patience, working within the ever changing schedules of various stakeholders; this sometimes has a cost implication.

As mentioned, power issues were another reported challenge of participatory evaluation approaches. As one interviewee reported, “I almost always have problems with power issues. In any culture, poor people do not hob knob with ministry people and literate people as they do in participatory evaluation approaches.” Trying to get stakeholders from different socioeconomic groups to participate collaboratively can be extremely challenging:

Another problem I experience is with senior and more experienced people dominating. Younger people without power tend to keep quiet as they are afraid to participate. Power issues are problems for all evaluations but they are particularly problematic for participatory evaluations. This is because participatory evaluations tend to bring all stakeholders together to discuss issues. In regular evaluations, stakeholders can be met with one on one to get their perspective. When I hold workshops, I like to have a mix of stakeholders present, that is, from all stakeholder groups. But I tend to group program staff with program staff, beneficiaries with beneficiaries, and so forth.

Discussion

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study is the confirmation that participatory evaluation approaches are interpreted and practiced in widely differing ways. On the surface that finding might not seem very substantial. However, given the continuing debates over the use of participatory evaluation approaches, it presents potentially interesting implications. For example, without a common understanding of what is meant by participatory evaluation (i.e., operational specificity; Miller, 2010), how can the merits or shortcomings of such approaches be legitimately debated?

That being said, and as the debates over the consequences of participatory evaluation rage on, the question of the relevance of these debates emerges. One of the biggest complaints waged by critics is that participatory evaluation approaches sacrifice objectivity and, even more troubling, validity via the inclusion of stakeholders and their potential interests in predetermined results. However, according to the majority of international development evaluators who participated in this study, evaluators largely maintain control of the evaluation process. Even so, another argument is that participatory evaluation approaches cross the line into intervention when empowerment and capacity building become objectives. Only a few respondents listed empowerment and capacity building as explicit objectives of using a participatory approach. If empowerment and capacity building are side effects that result from participatory evaluation approaches, should that be considered problematic?

Most intriguing is the rather common practice of evaluators referring to interviewing stakeholders or gathering or eliciting other types of information (e.g., recipients, government officials, implementing partners) as a legitimate form of participation. This view treats the notion of participation as essentially using stakeholders as sources of information or data (i.e., they become informants rather than true participants). This phenomenon emerged across all of the methods employed for this study (i.e., in the systematic review of evaluation reports, questionnaires, and follow-up interviews with evaluators).

Throughout the course of this study it became clear that the lack of a common and shared understanding of participatory evaluation was problematic. For example, numerous respondents reported that donors call for participatory evaluations but provide no explanation of what specific activities that entails. In the systematic review of a sample of international development evaluation reports, several evaluation reports clearly stated that they used a participatory evaluation approach yet provided no evidence to support such claims. In several instances, it seemed that stakeholders were only included as data sources, yet, even so, the evaluation was labeled participatory. Has participation become a catch phrase that evaluators are eager to assign to their evaluations but, in reality, has no significance?

The most frequently cited problem associated with the use of participatory evaluation approaches was increased time constraints. Respondents reported that the participation of stakeholders significantly increased the amount of time it took to conduct evaluations. From introducing new logistical constraints from the addition of more individuals to reconciling different priorities of stakeholders, participatory evaluation approaches are time consuming. However, even though donors frequently call for the use of participatory evaluation approaches, they do not seemingly recognize the

additional time and other demands required for such approaches. Numerous respondents reported that the terms of reference (TOR) and scope/scopes of work (SOW) with their corresponding pre-determined questions and methods issued by donors often do not allow for participatory evaluation approaches.

Donor dominance of the evaluation process was another important finding of this study. Survey and interview respondents reported that the prescribed SOWs and TORs for international development evaluations do not allow for flexibility in the evaluation process. More troubling are the reports of donors trying to interfere with evaluation findings by “cherry picking” stakeholders with positive impacts to trying to dominate less powerful stakeholders to, most troubling, trying to stifle negative findings. Such environments or perspectives are not at all conducive to conducting any evaluation with integrity, regardless of the level of participation of stakeholders.

The findings of this study underscore the importance of clarity and the need for details when discussing participatory evaluation approaches. Evaluators proposing to engage in a participatory evaluation approach should be prepared to answer the following questions: Which stakeholders will be included in the evaluation? In what capacity will they participate? In what evaluation phases will they participate? Who will maintain technical control over the decision-making process? The answers to these questions will help ensure that both evaluators and clients have a shared common understanding of the nature of participation.

Finally, the findings from this study demonstrate that the vast majority of participatory approaches to international development evaluation tend to be evaluator driven. While much of the debate surrounding participatory evaluation focuses on stakeholder-driven approaches such as empowerment evaluation, this study shows that those types of approaches are the exception in international development evaluation. This study underscores the importance of precision and specificity in detailing how participatory evaluation approaches are operationalized and implemented in order to accurately discuss their merits and demerits.

Limitations

The most serious limitation of this study is simply the lack of certainty that respondents are representative of the population of international development evaluators. Great effort was taken to ensure that news about the study was distributed to as wide an audience as possible in order to increase the diversity of respondents as well as to maximize the number of respondents. At worst, findings from the survey questionnaire are likely only generalizable to those with similar characteristics as respondents. An additional, albeit important, limitation is that the findings derived from the study reflect respondents' perceptions, perspectives, experiences, and opinions, not necessarily the actual reasons for and the politics underlying participatory evaluation in international development contexts. While understanding how international development evaluators perceive participatory evaluation approaches is important, they do not, however, take the place of empirical studies that research the true impact of participatory evaluation approaches.

Future Research

Some of the limitations and lessons learned from this study gave rise to ideas for improving future research into participatory approaches to international development evaluation and participatory forms of evaluation more generally. First, and before a similar study is undertaken, the classification framework for assessing participatory evaluation approaches should be revised. At a minimum, the framework should include a screening criterion for determining whether an evaluation is truly participatory: Are stakeholders included as more than a data source? If the answer to this question is negative, there is no need for continuing to assess the ways and extent to which the evaluation was

truly participatory. Second, a worthwhile and potentially interesting study would be an investigation into the actual impacts of participatory approaches to international development evaluation (e.g., contrasting a participatory evaluation approach with that of a nonparticipatory approach). Such a study would move beyond perceived impacts and would scientifically document real impacts. Finally, another recommendation for further research would be to investigate the frequency with which and the reasons why donors often request participatory evaluation approaches which numerous respondents reported to be one of the main reasons that they use participatory evaluation approaches. Understanding how often and why donors or evaluation sponsors call for participatory methods to be used will help put together another piece of the puzzle.

Final Remarks

The findings from this study compare favorably with Cousins et al.'s 1996 study on participatory evaluation in Canada and the United States. While many of the specific questions in the latter differ from the present study, there are, nonetheless, several worthwhile points of comparison. Findings from both studies suggest that evaluators largely maintain technical control of the evaluation decision-making process. In the present study, program staff were identified as the stakeholder group with the highest reported rate of participation in the evaluation process. In the Cousins et al. (1996) study, such fine distinctions were not made. Rather, that study reported that those connected to the program—developers, managers, funders, and implementers—had the highest reported participation. Finally, both studies found high levels of stakeholder participation in the data collection phase.

The findings from this study also comport well with Rebien (1996) who asserts that one of the necessary criteria for an evaluation to be considered participatory is that stakeholders are included as more than a data source. Information gathered from the systematic review of evaluation reports, questionnaires, and interviews demonstrated that many evaluators classify evaluations as participatory even if stakeholders have had a limited role. Classifying these types as participatory seems to be contradictory to the true intent of participatory evaluations. Finally, Daigneault and Jacob's (2009) participatory measurement instrument is promising and certainly a much needed addition. However, the findings from this study raise some questions as regards its likely reliability and, subsequently, its validity given that the latter is dependent upon the former.

With the exception of empowerment evaluation (Miller & Campbell, 2006), evaluation use (Brandon & Singh, 2009; Johnson, Greenesid, Toal, King, Lawrenz, & Volkov, 2009; Shulha & Cousins, 1997), theory-driven evaluation (Coryn, Noakes, Westine, Schröter, 2010), and a few others, very little empirical evidence exists to buttress the numerous theoretical postulations and prescriptions about most evaluation approaches and their perceived benefits. Yet, for many years evaluation scholars have urged the evaluation community to carry out empirical studies to scrutinize such assumptions and test specific hypotheses about evaluation practice (Alkin & Christie, 2005; Christie, 2003, 2009; Henry & Mark, 2003; Mark, 2007; Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991; Smith, 1993; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). Ultimately, each investigation makes incremental contributions to the field and taken together they should assist the broader evaluation community of scholars and practitioners in understanding and improving the theory, method, and practice of evaluation.

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