Gender & Development
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgde20

Learning about women's empowerment in the context of development projects: do the figures tell us enough?

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Published online: 26 Jun 2014.

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In this article, we consider three projects implemented by Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation: a project in Nepal focusing on capacity building (vocational skills training); a project in Bangladesh focusing on income generation; and a project in Kosovo working on agency – enhancing the voice of citizens in local governance. The article examines how donor requirements for demonstrating evidence-based results challenge project management in different ways, how facts and figures are generated, how experience is translated into reports, and how qualitative methods are used for evaluations. This is compared against a stakeholder (participant) perspective of their degree of satisfaction with project performance, obtained through case studies or focus group discussions. We take the four dimensions of empowerment, notably 'power-over', 'power-to', 'power-within', and 'power-with', and consider the degree to which these are captured through qualitative and quantitative monitoring and evaluation systems. The main finding is that quantitative methods stress aspects of 'power-to', whilst qualitative methods have potential to provide insights into a broader range of outcomes and impacts.

En el presente artículo, los autores examinan tres proyectos implementados por Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation: un proyecto en Nepal centrado en la construcción de capacidades (formación vocacional); un proyecto en Bangladesh centrado en la generación de ingresos; y un proyecto en Kosovo centrado en "agencia", para potenciar la voz de los ciudadanos en la gobernanza local. El artículo analiza los siguientes aspectos: la manera en que los requisitos impuestos por los donantes –en el sentido de que los resultados sean respaldados por la evidencia– genera distintas dificultades para la gestión de dichos proyectos; la forma en que son generadas las estadísticas; cómo las vivencias encuentran expresión en los informes; y el modo en que son utilizados los métodos cualitativos durante las evaluaciones. Tales aspectos son comparados con la perspectiva de los actores participantes en relación al desarrollo del proyecto, a través de la medición de su grado de satisfacción. El mismo se obtuvo mediante la aplicación de estudios de caso y de la realización de diálogos en grupos focales. Para efectuar este análisis, los autores se basan en las cuatro dimensiones del empoderamiento, a saber, "el

Gender & Development, 2014
Vol. 22, No. 2, 327–349, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2014.920986

poder sobre", "el poder para", "el poder interior", y "poder con", a fin de sopesar hasta qué grado las dimensiones señaladas son expresadas en los sistemas SyE [seguimiento (o monitoreo) y evaluación] cualitativos y cuantitativos. La conclusión principal gira en torno al hecho de que los métodos cuantitativos enfatizan los aspectos de "el poder para", mientras que los métodos cualitativos tienen el potencial de revelar hallazgos relativos a una gama más amplia de resultados y de impactos.

Dans cet article, nous considérons trois projets mis en œuvre par Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation : un projet au Népal centré sur le renforcement des capacités (formation en compétences professionnelles), un projet au Bangladesh axé sur la génération de revenus, et un projet au Kosovo portant sur le libre arbitre – amplifier la voix des citoyens dans la gouvernance locale. Cet article examine la manière dont les exigences des bailleurs de fonds concernant la démonstration de résultats basés sur des données factuelles soulèvent des difficultés pour la gestion de projets, ce à plusieurs égards, la manière dont les faits et les chiffres sont générés, la manière dont l'expérience est traduite en rapports, et la manière dont des méthodes qualitatives sont utilisées pour les évaluations. Cela est comparé à un point de vue des parties prenantes (participants) concernant leur degré de satisfaction par rapport aux performances de projet, obtenu grâce à des études de cas ou des discussions en groupe de réflexion. Nous prenons les quatre dimensions de l'autonomisation (empowerment en anglais), à savoir « le pouvoir sur », « le pouvoir de », « le pouvoir intérieur » et « le pouvoir avec », et réfléchissons à la mesure dans laquelle ces dimensions figurent dans les systèmes de suivi et d'évaluation qualitatifs et quantitatifs. La principale constatation est que les méthodes quantitatives mettent l'accent sur les aspects de « pouvoir de », tandis que les méthodes qualitatives ont le potentiel de donner des aperçus sur une gamme plus large de résultats et d'impacts.

Key words: women's empowerment; monitoring and evaluation; agency; social change

Introduction

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) can be potentially a powerful tool for awareness-raising, knowledge-sharing, and empowerment itself. In this paper we consider the M&E systems of three different development projects implemented by our organisation, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation (henceforward Helvetas), and examine how these support women's empowerment in contexts of gender inequality. We reflect on how these different development interventions approach women's empowerment through three ways, each specific to one project: supporting women to build their personal endowments (capacities); enhance their economic assets (income); and promote their voice, or agency (Kabeer 1999).

It is widely accepted that development projects focusing on power, and on increasing participation in decision-making, have greater difficulty in fulfilling conventional donor M&E requirements which emphasise countable inputs and outputs. We recognise that women's empowerment is challenging to measure because the empowerment process is not directly observable, and needs to be described through proxy indicators, indirect measures, or signs. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process which is related in a vast number of ways to many factors, rendering perception and subjectivities (Kabeer 1998) as well as context extremely important (Mahmud *et al*. 2012). Furthermore, empowerment processes are interwoven with relational aspects, an examination of which can be essential for 'understanding resistances, successes, re-negotiations and unintended outcomes of women's empowerment initiatives' (Fenneke Reysoo, personal communication, 24 April 2014). Yet we are limited in what we can cover here.

In this article, therefore, we will set out to explore – from the point of development practitioners – how we learn, as development practitioners, about women's empowerment and, more specifically, how we monitor and evaluate the outcomes of different project interventions aiming to empower women. The article starts with a description of three projects we are using here as case studies, their activities in support of women's empowerment, and their M&E systems. We then consider whether or not empowerment as an aim has in fact been 'lost in translation' because of the systems we use. Our findings show that understanding empowerment requires mixed methods, that capturing empowerment as a holistic process requires equally holistic M&E systems capable of analysing all power's dimensions ('power-over', 'power-to', 'power-within', and 'power-with'), and that we should design the M&E of women's empowerment to be itself an empowering, voice-enhancing, process. With this article, we aim to generate wider reflection and debate among our colleagues in our own organisation and in the wider development community on how, in a context of increasing demand in development circles for results expressed in figures, development practitioners can capture important changes in women's lives.

Learning about empowerment: points of departure and conceptual framing

This article adopts an approach that may differ from that of many readers, whom we assume to be gender specialists focusing on women's empowerment issues. A natural aim in this case would be to attempt to capture change in a manner that is carefully honed to the particular empowerment processes at play. Instead, as development practitioners engaged in supporting the implementation of development projects in a variety of ways, we felt it interesting to consider the regular, mainly quantitative M&E methods and results used, and to examine how – indeed whether – they provide insight into complex processes of change in gender power relations.

Table 1: Key fatures of the three 'case study' projects

	Employment Fund (EF)	Samriddhi	LOGOS
Where	Nepal	Bangladesh	Kosovo
What	Improve the living conditions of economically and socially disadvantaged youth providing *occupational skills training* and ensure their gainful employment through private-sector Training and Employment Service Providers (T&Es)	Contribute to the sustainable well-being and resilience of poor and extreme poor men and women in selected areas of Northern Bangladesh through *economic empowerment* by participating in selected value chains	Selected *partner municipalities* in South-Eastern Kosovo *are more accountable*, transparent, equitable, and effective in local governance and able to deliver key services to satisfy all citizen groups
Start	(2008–) 2011–2013 (–2015)	2010–2013 (–2014)	(2007–) 2010–2012 (–2013)
Funding	SDC/UKaid/World Bank	SDC	SDC
Budget (million US$)	6–7 per year	2.3 per year	4.7 (divided by 3 years)
Primary stakeholders[a]	Economically poor and socially discriminated youth in Nepal (12–15,000 youths per annum)	Poor and extreme poor men and women in selected areas of Northern Bangladesh – with a special focus on women since mid-2010	Citizens of nine selected partner municipalities in South-Eastern Kosovo
Implementing agency	Helvetas and EF Secretariat[b]	Helvetas and 18 NGOs, 62 SPA,[c] 100 companies and trading entities	Helvetas and partner municipalities

Table 1 (Continued)

	Employment Fund (EF)	Samriddhi	LOGOS
M&E systems: main common characteristics	All three projects: • Gather regularly data on activities, spending, and outputs disaggregated by gender. • Undergo external evaluations, usually using DAC criteria.[d] • Have a complex set-up of M&E methods and tools providing quantitative and qualitative data. • Provide quantitative data to donors, Helvetas Head Offices and implementing partners (surveys, audit). • Complement information with qualitative data collected through (systematic) direct observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion, and case studies. • Regularly (bi-annual and annual) report to donors (accountability) and also use M&E results for adjusting project's activities (steering) and learning.		
M&E systems: specific/distinctive characteristics	Over 60% of staff involved in results and process monitoring. Partner organisations monitor own performance and outcome; project verifies through random sampling	Individual service providers and partner organisations gather output and outcome data. Specific Monitoring and Results Measurement (MRM) Team	Monitoring of outcome is outsourced: annual citizen satisfaction survey undertaken by a private consultancy firm

Table 1 (Continued)

	Employment Fund (EF)	Samriddhi	LOGOS
	Tracer studies, impact assessment	Value chains and market analysis	Complementary SDC project on the 'demand side'
	Dissemination through reports, presentations, publications, Web, videos, newspapers, radio and TV. Online database accessible to implementing partners and project staff	Dissemination through reports, publications, documentary videos, newsletter, website	Dissemination through reports and presentations to donors, Helvetas, and partner municipalities
M&E periodicity	Intensive five stages usually within one year	Six-monthly	Annual and six-monthly
M&E unit	Individuals	Households and producers belonging to producer groups	Municipalities

[a]*We prefer the term 'primary stakeholder' to 'beneficiary', as it avoids any 'top-down' connotation, and upholds the sense of those benefiting from the project activities as right holders, not passive recipients. However, we are conscious that 'primary stakeholder' can be misconstrued to mean local implementing agencies, which is not our meaning. To avoid any confusion, we sometimes revert in this article to the word 'beneficiary'.*

[b]*The Employment Fund Secretariat is the official body managing the Employment Fund; further details may be found at www.employmentfund.org.np/ or http://nepal.helvetas.org/en/our_projects/employment_fund.cfm.*

[c]*Service providers in this context are individual men and women who have particular skills in horticulture, animal husbandry, financial management, or similar matters, and who offer their services on a remunerative basis. They have voluntarily joined associations of individuals with similar skills to facilitate access to information and physical inputs (such as pesticides, veterinary medicines, etc.). Most Service Provider Associations (SPAs) are of mixed gender, but their leadership is almost always men.*

[d]*The Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD-DAC) establishes five minimum criteria for evaluating development intervention that should be considered: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability (www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/daccriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm).*

Project M&E systems are generally required to serve three main functions: accountability, steering, and learning. Accountability tends to be upward, to the donor, but can potentially also be downward, to the end users or 'beneficiaries' (e.g. through public or social audit, or beneficiary assessment[1]). M&E data are also used for the future steering of projects – that is, responding to social and other context changes, both planned and unplanned, to ensure that the intervention remains on course and relevant to the interests and needs of the targeted population. Steering requires sound knowledge of the possible final impact of the project in the given context. In this article we set out to examine the 'fit' between the types of data that are collected for the purposes of accountability, steering, and learning, and women's realities on the ground.

Donor demands for quantitative evidence are currently increasing, since figures can be framed as 'value for money' in ways that facts and anecdotal evidence gleaned from qualitative data cannot (Eyben *et al*. 2013). Feminist critiques of the limitations of quantitative data for capturing complex change have existed for many years (an example is Jayaratne and Stewart 1991). Such critiques question who has the power to 'know' what, and how power comes into the process of producing knowledge. These critiques can be applied to a wide range of practices involved in conceptualising and implementing M&E systems, for example in the selection of indicators. As Caroline Moser (2007) points out, by choosing what to measure, the policymaker, advocate, researcher, or development practitioner can choose the story she or he wants to tell. However, the stories we tell are not at all, or only partially, our own stories. Hence the point of departure for us as we set out to write this article was, how do the stories of change that we tell relate to those that our 'primary stakeholders' tell?

As we wrote the article, we compared the information gained from M&E systems against the way that individual women who have benefited from the three projects described their experiences. In doing this, we sought to understand more about the processes through which changes in individuals' life experiences are translated into M&E data and, in turn, into information of various kinds. Ultimately, we need this better understanding to ensure that institutional learning takes place, and to be confident that we know all we need to know to ensure projects and their M&E systems genuinely support the empowerment of women.

The case study projects and process of analysis

The projects we focused on for this article are the Employment Fund (EF) in Nepal, Samriddhi in Bangladesh, and LOGOS in Kosovo. The EF provides vocational training/skills development and facilitates access to employment for young people, the Samriddhi project fosters employment and income generation through selected value chains, whilst LOGOS promotes effective, participatory, and socially inclusive local governance. The projects' key characteristics are outlined in Table 1. Each is executed by Helvetas, and funded in all or in part by the Swiss Agency for Development

Cooperation (SDC), meaning that reporting requirements and processes are broadly similar. Each has a quite comprehensive M&E system in place.

In gathering material for this study, those authors directly responsible for project management and/or M&E first completed a standardised questionnaire (devised by the principal authors) about their project's approach to women's empowerment, the M&E system design and operation, and the requirements of the different users of the information gathered. We shared and reflected on these answers. As a second line of enquiry, each project provided feedback from some of the women implicated in their activities – collected in two cases from a focus group discussion, and in one case (EF) from some previously elaborated individual case studies.

The country settings of the three projects are, of course, very different. Nepal, still in political turmoil after its civil war, is gradually addressing the deep discrimination experienced by women, so-called low castes (especially Dalits), and Janajati (indigenous) groups, as perpetuated under the Hindu caste system (Bennett 2006). One effect of the post-1990 democratisation process (and Maoist movement)[2] was to raise social consciousness, questioning discrimination on the basis of caste and gender, but it nevertheless still remains common in rural areas (Sharma and Donini 2010). Bangladesh has taken many strides to further the position of women since gaining independence just over 40 years ago. The schooling of girl children is often claimed as a particular success. Yet it remains a strongly patriarchal country characterised by stark gender inequalities (Mahmud *et al*. 2012). Kosovo, the youngest and smallest country of the three, is still in the process of institutional state building. The effects of communism, conflict, and everyday life in a difficult socio-economic context have had contradictory outcomes on gender relations and the role of women in society (Jafa 2002). The recent visceral war has left deep trauma, and the still on-going effects of the very high levels of violence against women during the war are rarely publicly discussed (UNFPA 2005).

Overview of project activities in relation to women's empowerment

Although the three projects were chosen for the different thematic focus that they have each adopted in supporting women's empowerment, in reality the 'specialist focus' is not exclusive, and there is a degree of thematic overlap. Furthermore, whilst all three projects make a particular attempt to reach women, they do so from a perspective of promoting inclusivity, actively bringing women into the development process rather than simply assuming their participation. It is recognised that unless women are deliberately targeted, they are less likely than men to participate in the activities on offer (in the case of the EF in Nepal, the same principle is applied to members of discriminated castes). At the same time, none of the projects focus exclusively on women.

Ways in which women are pro-actively brought into the project activities are varied; a brief (although not complete) overview is provided here.

The EF project in Nepal operates a 'carrot and stick' incentive scheme with the private vocational training institutions whom it partners. These service providers receive payments for each participant they train. 'Carrots' include a higher payment by the project to the institutions for women trainee participants than men (and also for Dalit or Janajati trainees) who complete training satisfactorily and are in gainful employment six months afterwards. Another effective 'carrot' exists in the form of less strict criteria for accepting women candidates than men (such as lower educational qualifications, given that girls often have to drop out of school to attend to family commitments). Since it is not always easy for training providers to recruit women candidates, this serves to facilitate selection. The training of Dalit women, traditionally doubly discriminated, attracts a premium for the institutes. 'Sticks' include fixed targets (60 per cent) for the proportion of women trained. If an institute trains a higher proportion of men than it is contracted to, it is simply not paid for these additional male trainees.

Samriddhi in Bangladesh builds on a history of previous development projects that included activities such as training local women as female mentors who conduct participatory gender analyses, and facilitate follow-up activities, within the communities in which they live. The post-2009 project has focused on specific 'value chains' (that is, the range of different businesses within the process of production and transformation through to sale of the processed products), promoting ways in which poor people can gain the greatest benefit. This was initially done without specific consideration of gender dynamics. Unfortunately, but not really surprisingly, the value chains with the greatest 'added value' potential (that is, the highest profit for producers or primary processors) turned out to be those dominated by men (e.g. bullock fattening for beef, and fish and fruit production). Facilitating women's involvement in such value chains was generally not possible due to strict gender-defined roles,[3] so since mid-2010, there has been a deliberate effort on the part of the project to focus on value chains dominated by women (such as medicinal plants, cotton crafts, and backyard poultry). In addition, local women as well as men have been encouraged to become private service providers, and thus gain an income through the sale of their knowledge and skills.

In promoting transparent, accountable, and inclusive local governance in Kosovo, LOGOS uses the tool of gender-responsive budgeting.[4] Thus, a clear spotlight is placed on the implications for men and women in the allocation of municipal funds, the planning and monitoring of which is conducted in a participatory process (Kroesschell 2012). All citizens – including women and members of minority communities – are actively encouraged to attend and participate in meetings discussing budgetary allocations. Furthermore, through institutionalising the scrutiny of budgets according to their impact on men and women, LOGOS supports women to advance their views both individually and collectively, ensuring that their voice has an impact on local government actions. The project also supports publicity campaigns on gender equality to raise awareness. To reinforce the gender-responsive budgeting process, it has ensured that municipal gender officers have a dedicated budget, enabling them to have an impact in their roles. In many countries it has been noted that government officials focusing on gender and women's issues often lack the economic resources to be effective in their roles, so a specific budget is potentially empowering for them. However, it should perhaps be noted that LOGOS differs from the other two projects in that the emphasis is on supporting the state institutional framework (working with the 'duty bearers', in governance terms). This means that the immediate beneficiaries are the municipal staff, rather than women and men citizens themselves.

All the projects have identified, and seek to address, a variety of specific challenges faced by women that potentially hinder them from involvement in project activities. In summary, the main challenges common to all three projects are:

- *Child care*: both the EF and Samriddhi try to ensure that child-care arrangements are in place if needed by women participants, although both also recognise that this is a complicated issue that cannot necessarily be addressed by simply ensuring a safe, supervised space for young children. In recognition of the fact that women in rural areas commonly have children in their teens or early 20s and are thus generally not free to absent themselves for training in institutions based some distance from their homes, the EF maintains a higher upper age limit (but the same lower limit of age 16) for accepting women rather than men. This means that project-supported training opportunities are still open to them in their late 20s or early 30s – also giving time to gain the approval of sometimes sceptical mothers-in-law – whilst for men the age limit is 25.
- *Female staff and role models*: in all three countries, gender-sensitive men and women, are required on the staff of the projects. Women approach other women more readily, whilst gender-sensitive men can provide excellent role models; the importance of the input of both sexes is underlined in our organisational human resources policy. Thus, it is important to have women as well as men in the roles of trainers, service providers, municipal officers, and so on. Our experience is that this is not always easy to arrange, but is at least actively sought.
- *Finances*: in both Nepal and Bangladesh, the projects facilitate access to credit for women involved in project activities. In Kosovo, the fact that the project provides a budget for municipal gender officers has given them a power in decision-making that they did not have before, and an opportunity to show that carefully planned gender-responsive interventions really make a difference. This can be seen from the quotation below, from Shefkije Mehmeti, head of municipal assembly from Novoberde municipality:

> *Starting from 2012, the municipality has allocated a budget for the gender officer based on the action plan that was developed in co-operation with LOGOS. The change was very big in ourselves because our self-confidence has increased as for the first time we felt even as women we could manage our own funds*. (Focus Group Discussion organised by LOGOS, 12 December 2013)

- *Women-focused training*: beyond the training offered to all project participants, the EF, Samriddhi, and LOGOS all offer some training courses only for women. These are specifically targeted to women's needs in business training in Samriddhi and EF (e.g. how to develop a business plan, how to access credit, taking into account the obstacles faced by women in so doing); 'life skill training' (EF); and legal rights, health, and violence against women (LOGOS).
- *Promotion of non-stereotypical roles*: this is particularly done by the EF, which offers counselling and financial incentives to women willing to take up male-dominated trades such as carpentry, masonry and mechanics.

As already noted, all three projects have quite sophisticated and comprehensive M&E systems in place, as briefly outlined in the project summary table (Table 1). The next section gives an overview of some of the points which we consider to be the most interesting and significant.

M&E systems used by the projects: an overview

Like most other donors, SDC requires M&E systems that provide at minimum information for the tracking of spending (focusing, for example, on activities and inputs) and outputs (for example, the number of participants in the project, the volume of products marketed, or the number of jobs obtained after participation). It is usually mandatory for projects supported by SDC to use a logical framework[5] (and it certainly was in our three cases). Logical frameworks have indicators that are grouped into output, outcome, and impact level. There is also the expectation that baseline data have been established at the start of the project, against which the values for the indicators can be compared over the years. In practice, this is not always as easy as it sounds – thus, for example, the EF relies mainly on self-assessment by the people whom the project involves and aims to benefit (we use the term 'primary stakeholders'), to collect its baseline data. However, this yields information which is considered less reliable than the project would like.

All three projects adhere to minimum M&E standards as defined by the OECD-DAC. In addition, each of them aims to reach topic-specific principles, criteria, and standards set for M&E. Samriddhi, notably, adheres to the DCED (Donor Committee for Enterprise Development) standard for value chains (see Kabir and Uraguchi 2013). Quantitative data are regularly (monthly, half yearly, annually, and bi-annually) gathered, fed into a database, and analysed, although the modalities vary. In the EF, for example, project staff undertake the bulk of M&E work, from data collection to analysis; indeed, over two-thirds (70 per cent) of staff – and 54 per cent of full-time staff – are employed on M&E duties. By comparison, LOGOS employs external consultants to collect much of its M&E data, with the rationale that this avoids bias, and leaves staff free to concentrate on their advisory and facilitation tasks.

Disaggregating data by gender and other identities

All the personal information generated in the M&E systems is disaggregated by gender and (where appropriate) caste or ethnicity. This makes it possible to track trends in women's participation, and their social and economic situation – as far as this can be defined through the indicators used. Examples from EF include the number of women completing training successfully, and the number in gainful employment six months after training (categorised further by stereotypical and non-stereotypical occupations). In Samriddhi, examples include the number of women who have been involved in the project as producers and now have an increased income, and a self-reported increase in participants who are taking an active role in household decision-making. Similarly, the number of women working outside their homes as service providers is recorded. For LOGOS, the figures collected include the number of women participating actively in municipal meetings or selected as council representatives.

Using M&E information in project steering

All these kinds of information are not only needed for accountability to donors, but undoubtedly have a valuable role in project steering if used to full effect. Humayun Kabir, a Monitoring Specialist for Samriddhi, offered an example of how this link between M&E and project steering can be fostered consciously. Gender-disaggregated data are a clear requirement for the Samriddhi log-frame at many levels. This revealed that there were fewer women than men present in the local-level Service Provider Association (SPA) executive committees, and in some, none at all:

> We noticed in our monitoring that there was no woman LSP [local service provider] in the executive committee of the Badargonj [Rangpur] SPA. So we pointed this out and they acknowledged the problem and took action to include a woman. This shows how monitoring can be used to positive effect. (Personal communication during a project workshop, 2013)

In LOGOS, the normal reporting for the log-frame has been augmented by a strong emphasis on monitoring gender aspects of the project through the budgets of the project municipalities themselves. Over the past two years, all key personnel involved in LOGOS have received intensive training in the use of gender-responsive budgeting.

As a result, each municipality is now required to develop its annual budget through a participatory process that includes a clear analysis of the gender implications of financial allocations.

Integrating and using qualitative findings

Whilst figures and budgetary allocations are important, all three projects recognise that quantitative data alone are not enough to inform project steering. Furthermore, in addition to the donor demand for hard, evidence-based facts, more qualitative, 'human-interest' information is also welcome. Thus, tools such as semi-structured and in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies are employed to collect such additional material. 'Additional' is, in most cases, the important word here, as the information gained does not substitute the figures, but rather fleshes them out by giving additional information and meaning/interpretation. An exception is the citizens-based survey used under LOGOS to track public satisfaction (or otherwise) with the functioning of the supported municipalities. This does offer a potential substitute for conventional quantitative methods of data collection, collecting mainly qualitative information using a statistically relevant sample. Conducted on an annual basis (two in the last year of the current phase) by an external consultancy company, these provide information regarding citizen perceptions of municipality performance in service delivery. They serve as the main information base used to track the impact of the project on transparent and accountable municipality functioning.

Learning and innovation through flexible systems

All three projects have a degree of flexibility in their M&E systems which allows for learning and innovation. This is an important feature, which all have used. The EF switched from monitoring all beneficiaries in the early days to using a sample approach once the volume of project funding and numbers of beneficiaries grew. Samriddhi faced many challenges in adapting the M&E system used by its predecessor projects, and had to modify it extensively. LOGOS initially used the M&E system developed by the Ministry of Local Government Administration. However, it proved unreliable and inadequately gender sensitive, so LOGOS developed its own system which is now likely to be taken up by the Ministry. LOGOS has managed to bring gender-responsive thinking into municipality operations in a way that gives hope for up-scaling to the national level. This illustrates another important point: projects need to be sensitive, if relevant, to existing institutional systems, and to try to improve and work with them if possible – or at least in compatibility with them.

Putting a price on M&E

As a final point before discussing our findings, the cost of M&E systems should be noted. Many donors limit the total cost of M&E to around 5–7 per cent of the total project budget, but this is difficult to stipulate, given the very different nature and significance of development projects. Furthermore, the cost can be calculated in different ways, especially with regard to staffing costs. The question remains: are sophisticated M&E systems themselves 'value for money' in terms of the information that they provide – to the donor, to project staff and partners, and to the project beneficiaries?

Having given an account of some of the main features of the M&E systems in our three case-study projects, in the next section we set out some key observations with regard to the three M&E systems, focusing particularly on the measurement of women's empowerment. We highlight some of the practical implications of our findings relating to the process of data collection, the type of data collected, what is being measured and what, in turn, can be demonstrated or learned from these data.

Discussing our main findings: lost in translation?

As we stated at the beginning of this article, our original hypothesis was that the familiar and predominantly quantitative M&E methods we use are most useful in capturing evidence of those aspects of empowerment which deal with skills and training – capacity building – and also useful in capturing evidence relating to increases in women's economic assets. We hypothesised that these methods would be least useful in assessing change as a result of projects aiming to support women's voice. However, upon analysis, we realised that the main issue in all cases is capturing the 'soft' aspects of empowerment, as we describe further below.

Understanding empowerment processes requires mixed methods

> *Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.* (Quote often attributed to Einstein, but which was actually William Bruce Cameron in 1963)

Clearly, all three projects on which we focus in this article are collecting huge amounts of quantitative data, doing so in a resource-intensive manner that involves many different people, from the 'beneficiaries', producers and service providers, to the staff of the project, specific monitoring task groups, and consultants. The EF and Samriddhi, in particular, use relatively sophisticated tools to collect, proceed, analyse, and store the large volume of quantitative data that they amass. This is keeping with the perception that such data are 'objective' and 'scientific', despite a literature which explores the biases and misconceptions that lie beneath this view (Oakley 2000). Whilst quantitative data are required by the donor – and certainly much of the data are used – it is also clear to all staff involved that quantitative data alone are inadequate to capture fully the complex and mainly qualitative nature of changes at individual, household, and social levels. All three projects need qualitative information to analyse progress further and interpret/understand changes relating to empowerment processes.

In her classic exploration of empowerment in development initiatives in Honduras, Jo Rowlands (1997, 13) distinguishes four different kinds of power: coercive 'power-over' which reflects structural power relations in society, the 'power-to' of individual agency, which can potentially challenge structural power, 'power-within', felt by individuals as psychological strength, and 'power-with' – many individuals acting collectively. Development interventions focusing on the empowerment of women should be interested in building both the self-confidence of 'power-within' which supports power-to, and fostering opportunities for women take the collective action which is an essential part of fostering wider change to male 'power-over' women as a social group.

M&E can capture some evidence of increased 'power-to' in numbers of people trained in a skill or knowledge, or able to market their products in a new way, or mobile phones distributed to enable women traders to share knowledge (this last example would also be an indicator which could potentially indicate increases in 'power-with'). However, 'power-within' is a realm of empowerment which does not directly lend itself to being captured by quantitative M&E methods.

Clearly, it is imperative to use mixed methods for gathering qualitative and quantitative information, if we are to understand all aspects of empowerment processes. Only then can M&E accurately reflect women's realities. While some initiatives have been taken to develop a systematic multi-method analytical approach (see Stern *et al*. 2012), this is a matter on which further reflection would be useful.

While qualitative M&E methods allow for a more nuanced description and understanding of changes, the way in which qualitative information is collected can also be criticised in tending to highlight successes rather than failures. The way in which questions are phrased (closed or open-ended) can beg a positive answer (e.g. 'What were the main things you learned?', rather than, 'Please give your views on the training'). Even if obvious, this is a common problem. Similarly, if data are gathered by persons implicated in the project, the respondents may feel a need to be polite and avoid mentioning negative aspects. Or they may, to the contrary, seek to highlight negative aspects in order to receive further contributions/input from the project. Qualitative data may also treated with suspicion, on the grounds of lacking statistical rigour and representativeness. Moreover, while any kind of data can be manipulated and used in an instrumental way to achieve goals set by project planners and implementers which are not the goals of the actual research participants themselves, qualitative data are often seen as more easily abused in this way. These criticisms can be responded to by improving the quality of M&E to ensure rigorous qualitative findings, various methods including triangulation, respondent validation, clarity on methodology, reflexivity, and attention to negative cases (Mays and Pope 2000).

Finally, whilst qualitative data are expected to add to the depth and richness of M&E, this is not automatic. If qualitative information is collected by an external agency with a clear, pre-determined mandate (as in the case of LOGOS), there is the risk that much potentially interesting information is ignored as irrelevant to the task in hand, and not transmitted to the project staff.

Understanding empowerment as holistic and moving beyond dichotomies

Our second observation concerns the need to move beyond commonly perceived dichotomies between quantitative M&E methods including closed-ended questions seen as yielding 'hard' data (e.g. numbers of individuals trained, measurable increases in income) and qualitative, open-ended methods (such as in-depth interviews) seen as yielding 'soft' data, and between ideas of empowerment as increasing agency as distinct from consciousness raising and confidence building.

Despite being characterised as yielding 'soft' data, research methods which involve open-ended discussion including focus group discussions and case studies yield a mix of 'hard' and 'soft' data. Hard data include shifts in decision-making within marriage – for example, on women's right and freedom to travel, or to choose their own clothes. Research methods associated with collecting qualitative data often actually reveal unexpected quantitative data, including changes in children's school attendance, better nutrition, and so on. However, projects do not set out to monitor such a wide range of outcomes, due to the cost of collecting mountains of data and the challenge of attribution (e.g. linking women's capacity building to children's nutritional status). In contrast, 'soft' data can be characterised as perceptions and impressions of less tangible and material changes, which nevertheless have immense significance in women's lives: for example, women's sense of increased self-confidence, and perceptions of greater respect in the community. These outcomes are actually more readily attributable to project activities, but are not yet specifically monitored.

We were struck as we explored the three projects that, as the following quotations show, and they are typical in this respect, the changes associated with 'soft' data appear to be what the women value most in projects. While this is probably a very obvious point for feminists working with women, starting from supporting the development of a sense of 'power-within', it is noteworthy for practitioners who tend to focus on supporting 'power-to' through provision of material resources and other tangible changes. In contrast, feminist models of power emphasise the connections between different kinds of power and their impact on each other.

The EF's activities to support the growth of 'power-to' via training inputs had a marked impact on one woman's sense of 'power-within' – which in turn boosted her business by extending her 'power-to'. Bimala Biswhakarma, aged 26, who attended three months of training in a particular form of weaving known as Dhaka at a technical institute in Birtamode, Jhapa, was interviewed on 28 April 2012 as one of a limited number of individual life histories gathered to complement the project's tracer study[6]. It may be noted that she grew up doubly discriminated, both for her sex, and as a Dalit. She stated:

> *After acquiring the skills from the training I have totally transformed my previous identity. In the past people used to know me through my husband's name and I could hardly talk with outsiders. Now equipped with my skills I can openly talk to people. And with my income I am sustaining my family.*

Sarita Sijapati, aged 21, who attended three months of training in mobile phone repairs as part of the EF's activities, also gave an account of dramatic change to her sense of power and status within the community via an interview in Bhimduttanagar, Kanchanpur (8 October 2013):

> *I found the perception of society towards me is quite changed. I am also in a women's group which we formed recently and I have respect in my group. My colleagues ask me to mediate if there are any difficulties in the group. Some months ago people used to show me pity for my condition, but now they praise me for my success. This enhanced my self-respect and it also encouraged me to expand my business.*

As Lynn McIntyre *et al*. (2013, 454) have written, approaches that focus on story-telling, life histories, and other narrative methods can render visible the otherwise 'unmeasured spheres of gender (in)equality and women's (dis)empowerment'. They can also make visible changes in power relations, as in the quotation here from Bangladesh.

> *Before taking part in the project-initiated interventions, I was not allowed to visit places outside my house. This all changed after I joined the duck-rearing producers' group. My income and communication skills increased and improved. Due to the income and awareness, my husband allows me to attend different meetings of the producers' group, village, Union, Upazila, and district levels. Due to my involvement in the producers' group, other producers encouraged me to run for a local government election as member in Union Parisad* [UP – lowest tier of local government in Bangladesh]. *I was motivated to try and finally was successful in winning the election. From a simple housewife, I am now an elected member of the UP.* (Rekaha Rani, participant in Focus Group Discussion organised by Samriddhi, 22 December 2013)

Open-ended research methods which can capture a broad range of outcomes (expected and unexpected) clearly have an important role when monitoring and evaluating projects aiming to support women's empowerment. The widespread preference for quantitative data in M&E adds a new twist to this since experiences translated in quantitative terms can result in such a different report of reality compared with experiences translated into narratives which reveal perceptions and opinions.

Furthermore, if the process of translation privileges research methods which use more closed questioning methodologies, it may lose – or miss the opportunity to make visible – some significant elements of changes.

Understanding the empowerment of individuals

Gender and development literature emphasises that women's own perceptions of empowerment are both specific to them as individuals, and particular to their social and economic context. These perceptions are not necessarily shared with project staff, or with women in other social and economic contexts. Thus, the reality of 'beneficiaries' is not the same as the one of the project staff and copying successful approaches in order to standardise development interventions in 'recipes' is not viable. As Dee and Ibn Ali (2010) argue, the best way to measure empowerment is to ask those directly concerned. The more that project 'beneficiaries' have the opportunity to be actively engaged in the process of knowledge production, the more space they will have to represent reality in their own terms. But this will not necessarily be in statistically valid figures.

M&E can track many changes which occur at the individual level. In the projects we looked at, there are ways of gaining information on empowerment of women as individuals – for example, the EF tracks individuals through tracer studies. Both EF and Samriddhi plan to place more emphasis on individuals' self-identified indicators of empowerment in future. Samriddhi, up to now focusing on households, aims to orientate its M&E system to individuals in the future.

Attribution in a complex wider context of change

As a final and fourth observation, M&E systems are inevitably project-focused, yet they do not operate in a vacuum. 'Attribution or contribution?' is, of course, a perennial M&E dilemma – but it is nevertheless important to take into account the actions of other projects, the individual, and general self-development and contextual changes. The more an M&E system tries to rely on quantitative data alone for its analysis of how it has contributed to change, the more difficult this is. As a case in point, and as already mentioned, we are aware that women's economic empowerment is likely to lead to improved child nutrition, and of research in Bangladesh that shows this (Bhagowalia *et al*. 2012). However, establishing a causal link between Samriddhi and the children of women 'beneficiaries' would require a data collection system far beyond the scope and means of a development project.

Conclusions

We began this paper by noting that M&E systems are generally required to serve three main functions: accountability (both upward but also potentially downward), steering, and learning. Of these, we fear that it is upward accountability that is gaining ground. In times of economic constraint, donor agencies and implementing bodies are under heavy pressure to demonstrate 'value for money' in their activities. This is certainly the case for bilateral co-operation, budgets for which are under increasing scrutiny by politicians – and here we are thinking well beyond Switzerland, where the donor agency retains a degree (albeit shrinking) of political autonomy. Inevitably, 'value for money' seems to require quantifiable facts. Nevertheless we wonder if better communication on the part of development professionals about the worth of qualitative evidence in demonstrating value could mitigate this demand.

There is a growing body of literature advocating the use of mixed methods for M&E (see Stern *et al*. 2012, amongst others). Our own findings have shown that this would allow a much more nuanced view of outcomes in terms of women's empowerment and, importantly, would leave space for women to identify their own indicators of change. At the time of writing the conclusion to this paper, one of us was struck to read the following comment made by a woman who had participated in a training session in Kyrgyzstan, which perfectly highlights the issue we have raised in this paper:

> *Question: Would you like other farmers to join such project activities?*
>
> *Response: Yes, of course. Firstly, they can change and develop their self-awareness. Secondly, participating in meetings and trainings will help them to get useful information that they can use in practice*. (Interview with Malika Djulaeva, Tolman village, Kyrgyzstan, 4 March 2014)

Malika Djulaeva identified the development of self-awareness, or 'power-within', as the first reason why farmers should participate in trainings about the efficient use of irrigation water. She prioritised this ahead of the practical information the training was ostensibly organised to provide. In short, it could be argued that we are measuring the wrong things because we are too focused on what can be readily counted and on measuring results according to a very limited list of objectives. This brings us back to the women with whom we work. If we take the issue of their empowerment seriously, not only with regard to the activities that we implement but also in how we generate knowledge and learning about their life experiences (related to project interventions), we need to reflect on our role in M&E processes as translator. Does it have an empowering, or a disempowering, effect?

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Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to the editor, Caroline Sweetman, for all her very helpful and insightful suggestions on a first draft of this paper – resulting in major improvements to the thrust of its main argument. We would also like to thank Fenneke Reysoo, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology of Development of the Graduate Institute, Geneva, for rapidly reading and commenting on the revised draft of the paper at very short notice. Given that the three projects discussed in the paper are all funded – in full or in part – by the SDC, we would like to acknowledge the role played by this agency in the generation of the data presented. Nevertheless, the analysis and the arguments presented are those of the authors alone.

Notes

1 Beneficiary assessment (BA) is described by the World Bank as 'systematic consultation with project beneficiaries and other stakeholders to help them identify and design development activities, signal any potential constraints to their participation, and obtain feedback on reactions to an intervention during implementation. BA is an investigation of the perceptions of a systematic sample of beneficiaries and other stakeholders to ensure that their concerns are heard and incorporated into project and policy formulation. The general purposes of a BA are to (1) undertake systematic listening, which 'gives voice' to poor and other hard-to-reach beneficiaries, highlighting constraints to beneficiary participation, and (2) obtain feedback on interventions. BA is a qualitative method of investigation and evaluation that relies primarily on three data collection techniques: in-depth conversational interviewing around key themes or topics; focus group discussions; and direct observation and participant observation (in which the investigator lives in the community for a short time) (http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTSOCIALDEV/0,contentMDK:21233768~menuPK:3291499~pagePK:64168445~piPK:64168309~theSitePK:3177395,00.html, last checked by the authors 25 April 2014). For more information, see also Salmen (1995), and for practical examples, www.poverty-wellbeing.net/en/Home/Addressing_Poverty_in_Practice/Beneficiary_Assessment (last checked by the authors May 2014).

2 Deep inequalities between different social groups have been a factor behind the long-standing communist movement in Nepal, which has taken different forms over the years. Between 1996 and 2006, Nepal's Maoist movement waged a 'People's War' against the then Royal Government of Nepal with the aim of overthrowing the monarchy, establishing a 'People's Republic', and realising their 40-point list of demands (a significant number of which relate to issues of inequality) (for more information, see Hutt 2004).

3 We are making a generalisation here, as the feasibility of women's involvement varies by value chain. For example, fishing is highly male dominated, requiring access to a boat and mobility during the hours of darkness, in addition to specialist skills and knowledge. For a woman to take up fishing would be extremely daring, and invite negative reaction. By contrast, the project has supported women in bullock fattening – including minority, Hindu women (although Hindus eschew beef, raising animals for this purpose is not necessarily seen negatively). Whilst women attended trainings and raised the bulls, it was found that often their husbands took over the marketing side, negotiating prices and receiving the payment. Whether this resulted in women seeing no reward for their efforts, or in gaining respect and greater negotiation power in household decision-making, depended on the particular couple dynamics. Project staff observed, nevertheless, that the likelihood of the latter outcome was greater where awareness-raising on gendered roles had been conducted.

4 UN Women defines gender-responsive budgeting as 'government planning, programming and budgeting that contributes to the advancement of gender equality and the fulfillment of women's rights. It entails identifying and reflecting needed interventions to address gender gaps in sector and local government policies, plans and budgets. GRB also aims to analyze the gender-differentiated impact of revenue-raising policies and the allocation of domestic resources and Official Development Assistance' (www.gender-budgets.org/).

5 The logical framework is a planning, management, monitoring, and evaluation tool that summarises a project's basic intervention logic in a matrix showing the causal connection between the activities and inputs to be provided from the project to its intended achievements of goals on outcome and impact level. It also provides the necessary qualitative and quantitative indicators and measurement methods and sources for assuring the completion of foreseen objectives and the important risks and assumptions (see www.zewo.ch/impact/en/ or Department for International

Development, www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/253889/using-revised-logical-framework-external.pdf, last checked by the authors May 2014).

6 A tracer study 'tracks down a group of graduated trainees who have participated in VET (Vocational Education and Training) programmes in specific trades and explores their current and past employment activities, any possible effects of the training/studies on their income, their satisfaction with the job, the quality and relevance of training received and the interrelation between their studies/training and work among other factors' (see Macchi *et al*. 2009, 3).

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