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# Assessing interventions and change among presumed beneficiaries of ‘development’: a toppled perspective on impact evaluation

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## Introduction

Why do evaluations of development programmes in Africa produce so few new ideas on poverty alleviation and societal change? Why do evaluations of development initiatives in general so often give the impression of being rather limited and technocratic exercises? Why is there often much more information on the organizations which are implementing development activities than on the impact of these activities? Perhaps this is due to the way development interventions are being evaluated. In an editorial for the *Broker* (Bieckmann, 2008, p. 3) about the recent IOB evaluation of the Dutch Africa policy between 1998 and 2006, Frans Bieckmann had the following to say:

*‘A different kind of evaluation is needed, one that includes a much more integrated analysis of national and regional dynamics...Analytical tools for this have yet to be developed...The picture that emerges is of a doctor who treats the patient’s broken arm one year, a bad back the next, and later maybe a head injury. Never the whole body. Nor the environment in which the patient became ill. It is even less likely that the doctor entertains the possibility that he himself might have been the cause of the patient’s recurring physical problems...Maybe next time the ‘patients’ themselves should be allowed to judge their doctor’s treatment?’*

Most development-oriented evaluations are programme, project and organization specific. Programme or project evaluations focus on the degree to which the intervention’s outcomes have been achieved (*effectiveness*) or on the *efficiency* or *sustainability* of the intervention’s implementation. The starting point usually lies with the policies behind, and the objectives of, the interventions and with the intervening organization rather than with the poverty questions to which the interventions in a particular area relate or the way these are perceived by the target groups of the interventions. What is often lacking in evaluations is attention to an analysis of the poverty situation, including its underlying causes in that particular area, the perception of the population with regard to this poverty situation, and the degree to which the aid interventions were directed at the removal of these perceived causes of poverty. In other words, the *relevance* of

the interventions for the alleviation of poverty is hardly addressed during evaluations, with relevance being defined as the degree to which the interventions respond to a target group's needs or development priorities. The intervention's relevance is often taken for granted (if only for practical reasons, as quick evaluations are not suitable for a study of the context of poverty). A consequence of such an evaluation approach is that if evaluators see that programme or project outcomes are not being achieved, they tend to attribute this to weak implementation capabilities of the implementing organization, or to unruly circumstances or to the characteristics of target groups (which may easily result in *victim blaming*). Therefore, certain recommendations of evaluation studies are implicitly based on the assumption that reality in the field 'refuses' to adapt to policy. Policy itself, the poverty and societal analysis underlying policy (the 'policy theory'), the design of the programmes and projects, are usually kept out of harm's way. With the recent emphasis on sector-wide approaches, at the expense of 'integrated rural development', evaluations tend to become even more focused on top-down, single-issue approaches to development, driven by central-level ministries and supported by donors withdrawing from field-level 'hands-on' experiences.

In this contribution we will provide two examples of a different approach, which takes the poverty context as a point of departure, and focuses on people's own valuation and assessments of what has been happening in their lives and how that was perceived to be caused by interventions/development initiatives from outside. We will also provide a few illustrations of the type of findings, but the focus of the paper is on the approach, the evaluation methodology, with our aim being to inspire others to follow suit and to provoke more debate on these types of evaluation experiments. The perspective is bottom-up, based on discussions among presumed beneficiaries of development interventions and of their assessment of social change (broadly defined). The perspective is long-term, which means a few decades. The perspective is not on single sectors or types of interventions, but on all perceived interventions in a certain area, which is small enough to make the exercise sufficiently detailed. Participatory evaluations are nothing new. However, we believe that the approaches used here provide valuable insights that are a necessary addition to the participatory approaches, which either fail to be long-term and/or actually holistic. We therefore regard our approach as being a 'toppled perspective'.

### Two area-specific evaluations

We will give two examples of evaluations, which were performed, *grosso modo*, in the above-mentioned manner, although they differ considerably and were not influenced by each other's experiences. They took place between 2000 and 2002 in Kenya and Tanzania respectively. Both regions experienced the presence of large, relatively long-lasting, multi-sector Dutch-sponsored development programmes: the Arid- and Semi-Arid Lands Development Programmes (ASAL, 1981-1999) in Northwest Kenya and the District Development Programmes (1987-2002) in Tanzania. They formed part of one of the key components of Dutch development assistance to Africa during that period, the integrated rural development programmes (see Sterkenburg and Van der Wiel, 1999) which stopped rather suddenly after 2000 (see IOB, 2008; particularly

chapter 9 about rural development, pp. 257-292 – in Dutch). Both experiences will be described, and some comparison of merits and demerits will be added.

### *Northwest Kenya*

The West Pokot District in Northwest Kenya was considered a typically vulnerable area during the last 20 years of the last century. People had to cope with occasional droughts, resulting in poor grazing, livestock losses, crop failure and hunger. Livestock diseases undermined livelihood security. Human disease epidemics resulted in deaths and high health costs. Raids by neighbouring pastoralists, and counter-raids, resulted in the loss of both human life and livestock, the destruction of property and restrictions in movement (affecting grazing negatively). Army activities resulted in human deaths, livestock confiscation and slaughter and a general feeling of insecurity. Poverty is now widespread, and this is expressed in terms of deteriorating livestock numbers per capita, and occasional famines due to livestock deaths, harvest failure and violence. Many Pokot also express feelings of despair as a result of the feeling that they could no longer live their lives as they want to.

A large number of agencies promoting 'development' (and Christianisation) have been active in the West Pokot area since about 1979. A lot of projects started as disaster aid, during and after a devastating crisis period in the area between 1979 and 1981. The Kenyan Provincial Administration governs the area, with 'divisions' headed by a District Officer responsible for the coordination of the actions of the various 'line ministries' in the area. However, these departments generally suffered from a lack of development funds and their civil servants (most of whom originate from elsewhere in the country) had to cope with small salaries and rapidly decreasing purchasing power, which negatively affected their performance. A lot of multilateral and non-governmental agencies operated in the area. These included the Red Cross, the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the Netherlands Development Organization SNV, two Dutch-sponsored Harambee Foundations (one focusing on health and one on water), Christian Children's Fund, World Vision, and more than ten churches of various dominations. The biggest development programme in the area was the ASAL Programme (the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands Programme) for West Pokot. This was a collaborative activity between the Kenyan state and the Dutch development agency; although almost all the funds came from the Netherlands. Most of its activities were related to agriculture, livestock/veterinary health, forestry, and environment, education, water, social services and public works/roads. It operated mostly through the District Development Committee (DDC), an amalgamation of civil servants (most of them not from the District) and church/NGO representatives, although it was not linked to the Local Council. Hence, most of the people involved in the DDC were non-elected non-Pokot (while the majority of the Local Council consisted of elected Pokot councillors who nevertheless had very limited powers). As a consequence, 'government' was regarded as a 'foreign body', and some Pokot even regarded the civil service as part of 'the enemy'. Pokot often balance mistrust ('they just want to exploit or humiliate us' and 'they are just there to fill their pockets') with high expectations ('after all those

years of neglect we deserve progress' and 'the government should at last give us a, b, c'.

The University of Amsterdam originally played the role of 'backstopper' for the ASAL programme. In a later phase, after the closure of the ASAL programme in 2000, the University of Amsterdam and Moi University's School of Environmental Studies in Eldoret undertook a self-funded ex-post impact study (2001, 2002). One of their research activities involved the organisation of three participatory impact evaluation workshops, being an assessment of twenty years of 'change' and of the impact of development interventions. All the research performed was related to the core question of whether those interventions indeed diminish the vulnerability of the inhabitants according to their own judgements.<sup>2</sup> The workshops in question were part of a mixed methods approach designed to allow a judgement to be made of developments from multiple perspectives (it included questionnaires, document analysis, key person interviews and the analysis of newspapers). In this paper we focus on the experiences of the participatory evaluation workshops, as these can be regarded as the most innovative of the various research methods. The total result of the long-term study will be published in a book to be published in 2009.<sup>3</sup>

### *Northern Tanzania*

Mbulu in northern Tanzania is a district with a high level of poverty due to low incomes and deficient social services. An estimated 40-50% of the population is poor in an absolute sense, i.e. earning less than a minimum to satisfy basic needs. There are periodic famines and the majority of people express poverty in terms of food shortages and deteriorating social relations. They relate increasing poverty to the government's neglect of agro-support services and the weak performance of the district administration. There seems to be a deadlock between government and citizens, and between leaders and ordinary people about the strategy for development and poverty reduction.

The biggest development programme in the area has been the Dutch-funded Mbulu District Rural Development Project (MDRDP), one of 14 district development programmes supported by the Dutch in Tanzania since the early 1980s. The programme's main interventions were in income generation (agricultural and livestock extension, protection of natural resources, credit, road rehabilitation), health, education, building capacity of the administration, community participation and land use planning. The Roman Catholic Church was also active in Mbulu, as well as a scattering of small evangelical groups. Compared to West Pokot in Kenya the 'development activities' of the churches were rather limited and there were hardly any non-faith-based NGOs active in the area.

The Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs carried out an evaluation of changes taking place in northern Tanzania based on population viewpoints. The aim was to examine the extent to which interventions had addressed the basic causes of poverty as perceived by the local population. In addition, the study examined the extent to which the interventions were in line with the dynamics of change in these rural areas, and the priorities of the popula-

tion, with these being considered as an indication of the relevance and potential effectiveness of the aid programme in reducing poverty and improving the population's living conditions. The field study, which covered the districts of Mbulu and Songea, was coordinated by MDF (Sjoerd Zanen and Jacoline Plomp) and carried out by the University of Dar-es-Salam (Chachage et al)<sup>4</sup>. We focus here on the Mbulu experiences.

## Methodology

For the evaluations of the 'vulnerability' situation in West Pokot and the 'poverty' situation in Mbulu different methodologies were used (cf documents cited).

### *West Pokot*

The most important research activity was the organisation of three participatory impact evaluation workshops, covering five of the seven administrative divisions in West Pokot District<sup>5</sup>. The researchers facilitated a local-level assessment of twenty years of 'change', of interventions, and of the impact of interventions. Two workshops took place in 2001 (those in Nasukuta and Kodich) and one in 2002 (the workshop in Kiwawa). Each workshop lasted three days and the participants at each of these workshops were between 30 and 50 local leaders, that is elected councillors, appointed chiefs and assistant chiefs, local church leaders, women group leaders and teachers. Some civil servants also participated. They were assisted by the West Pokot Research team, which had carried out a thorough document analysis before then and which had, in one way or another, already been part of twenty years of socio-economic, geographical and cultural research in the area.

The workshop programme consisted of the following activities. People were asked (and assisted) to write personal life histories, with special attention for what is locally regarded as the major disaster period (1979-81). There was a joint reconstruction of the history since 1979, focusing on the 'problem years', and also a joint reconstruction of all development projects in the area, by all relevant agencies, and in all 'sectors'. This was followed by a major discussion of poverty and the changes in 'capabilities' between 1980 and 2002, differentiating between natural, physical, human, economic, cultural, and socio-political capabilities, on the basis of an amended version of Bebbington (1999). All this culminated in an assessment of the impact of each of the projects and activities on each of the six groups of 'capabilities', and on their importance for poverty alleviation. In addition, the participants of sub-areas were asked to grade all projects per area and to select the ten 'best' and the ten 'worst' projects. In the workshop in the third research area this was done per subgroup of men and women. Finally, there was a concluding discussion of the development prospects of the area and this frequently turned into a debate on the virtues and vices of 'donor-supported development initiatives'.

In the analysis of this wealth of data, all the development interventions were listed according to four major types of actors/'donors': (1) the 'government', (2) the 'ASAL programme', (3) churches and their development agencies, and finally (4) non-church

NGOs. Although central and local government agencies were present with a variety of civil servants 'on the ground' for 'normal government duties', they were listed only if the workshop participants regarded these activities as 'development initiatives'. Often, those government development activities had been funded by a foreign donor agency (e.g. SIDA, or the World Bank). The ASAL programme was treated as a separate agency (even if it was formally part of 'the government') because of its sheer size, and people's perception of 'ASAL' as more of an NGO than a government body.

### *Mbulu*

A number of studies were undertaken as part of the evaluation and these included a thorough historical socio-economic study and a study of all project documents and policy files. A field study by a team of Tanzanian researchers was carried out in four carefully selected villages in Mbulu and together they generated a balanced overview of the various ecological and socio-economic circumstances in the research area. The team conducted structured and unstructured interviews in these selected villages, with separate interviews for men and women and for farmers and 'officials'. The team also organised focus group discussions with different population categories. Finally, the team interviewed key informants in the district centre such as politicians, businessmen, officials of government agencies, staff of the MDRDP and representatives of churches and some NGOs. Moreover, to record the perceptions of the various groups among the local population regarding their own situation, video recordings were made. Approximately 200 people were interviewed as individuals, as representatives of organisations or as a group in eleven villages in Mbulu District. The video team conducted structured and unstructured interviews, and people were also asked to respond to video recordings. The video team also organised group discussions with various population categories. This methodology implied that perceptions were obtained through both video recordings/analysis and a field study applying various types of interviews. Subsequently, the perceptions of all stakeholders were compared with other sources of information, such as statistics, and policy, progress and evaluation reports.

Answers were sought to three specific questions. Which processes can be identified in the rural areas that influenced changes in the living conditions and degree of poverty of different segments of the population (a joint analysis concerning the last two generations)? What were the main characteristics of government policy in Tanzania with regard to poverty reduction and to what extent was this policy in line with the processes of change in rural areas and the people's perceptions of poverty (a mixed analysis of documents and stakeholder interviews in Mbulu)? Moreover, how has Dutch development co-operation helped to reduce poverty, and how can the activities in question be evaluated in relation to the poverty situation and the perception of the population (a multi-method sharing of opinions by both individual as well as group interrogation)?

## Outcomes of the evaluations

### *West Pokot*<sup>6</sup>

The year 1979 was taken as an obvious starting point: it was the beginning of a period of disasters, which seriously undermined the economic independence of the mainly pastoral Pokot in the research area. Before 1979 the area was a remote backwater of Kenya, for a long time even a 'closed district', and partly administered by Uganda, which utterly neglected it. 1979 was also widely regarded as a turning point because suddenly a lot of outside agencies came to the area, mostly to provide disaster mitigation support.

During the workshops a detailed chronology of events between 1979 and 2002 was drawn up. The events recorded included cattle raids, epidemic human and cattle diseases, the activities of various government, church and NGO agencies, military action, political events, famine, food relief, droughts and floods, death of a leader, etc. Next, the perceptions of positive and negative changes in the living conditions in the area during the last twenty years were recorded. The answers were arranged according to six so-called capability domains (natural, physical, economic/financial, human, cultural and social/political). Positive as well as negative perceptions were noted for each of these domains. For instance, the example of the findings in two 'domains' in the Kiwawa workshop shows the tensions of change as perceived by the Pokot respondents in this area. In the economic/financial domain the perceived positive changes were formulated as being:

*'More businesses. Some income through the sale of miraa and the mining of gold and ruby. Interaction with other communities outside the area. More organisations and donors have come to assist the people. Money is now accepted. People feel superior when they have it. It improves one's living standard, and it can raise one's status. More (exchanges of) commodities improved the development of the area'.*

While the negative assessment was:

*Low employment and lack of job opportunities. Poor production of both livestock and crops. Inflation of prices of commodities. No credit facilities for businessmen and women available. Money can easily be stolen. Money creates poverty and envy. Civil servants who are employed far from home can easily divorce. Spread of diseases and use of drugs by youth. Loans may lead to stress.*

In the social and political domain people had a positive assessment of the following aspects:

*This community counts on the multi-party system for positive changes. More Pokot became national leaders. More local people are now in local leadership positions. More organisations are active in the area (women groups, youth groups).*



But the downside of this was thought to be:

*Little has been done by the elected leaders and the government. The community feels neglected by their elected leaders because of their greed and corruption. The government has also been corrupt. The elected leaders live far away from the people. Nepotism and tribalism are prevalent.*

The picture above reveals a strong ambiguity in perceptions. On the one hand the participants talk the 'language of development', in which some changes are perceived to be 'the fruits of modernity', like a monetary economy, more democracy and more civil society freedom. However, the perceived positive change remains *wishful thinking* to some extent, while the economic and social consequences of modernity appear quite negative as well: money, but little wage labour opportunities, rising prices, stress and lack of credit facilities; democracy, but greed, corruption, nepotism and tribalism ....

During the workshop, people discussed the roles of the various external agencies, which were contributing to change. It became clear that a lot of participants had a grudge against 'the Government'. This was mainly due to military operations when the Pokot were disarmed by force (1984-86). The government was also negatively associated with the way a hydro-electricity project was being realised without compensation for those who had lost land. People were much more positive about the many non-governmental and church agencies which are all involved in 'development projects'.

The various judgements by the workshop participants concern a total of 839 different 'projects' in these five administrative divisions (and in ten geographical research areas) during the last twenty years. These have been identified by the participants, and arranged per type of donor. Church organisations have been responsible for most projects (338.5), followed by the ASAL programme (198.5), the government (161) and non-church NGOs (141). Table 1 gives the people's summarised assessment of all these different projects.

*Table 1 Categories of project assessment in West Pokot*

Category of assessment	% of all projects
1 project never really started, or project was negligible	13
2 project existed, but had no lasting impact, 'nothing to be seen on the ground'	11
3 project is still on-going, no impact to be assessed yet	33
4 project was finished and had an impact perceived as positive	39
5 project was finished and had an impact perceived as negative	4

Where measured separately, men judged differently to women, and there were also differences of opinion in the ten areas represented during the workshops. The outcomes can be summarized as follows.

Projects by 'the government' had a higher score than average as regards 'negligible', a lower than average score as regards 'positive impact', and a remarkably high score as regards 'negative impact'. Projects, which were part of the ASAL programme, had a relatively high score as regards 'positive impact', but also a relatively high score as re-

gards 'unsustainable impact'. Projects, which had been implemented by the many churches present in the area, had a relatively high score as regards positive impact. Non-church NGOs had a remarkably high score as regards 'negligible projects', but a remarkably low score as regards 'negative impact'. These results are shown in Table 2, excluding the on-going projects, for which 'impact' could not yet be established.

Table 2: Assessment per type of donor

Category of assessment	Government	ASAL	Churches	Non-church NGOs
1 negligible	+	-	~	+
2 no lasting impact	-	+	-	~
4 positive impact	-	+	+	~
5 negative impact	++	~	~	--

++: more than twice the average; + more than average; ~ average (+/- 1); - less than average; -- more than half the average

The impact of all projects combined was considered highest as regards the 'human capability' (people's skills, knowledge level, health). The perceived impact was less on changes in the natural capability (pastures, agriculture, water supply), and on cultural capabilities (religion, tradition, moral questions). All four kinds of donors were active in all domains, and they had a perceived impact on all capabilities, although there were a number of interesting differences, including between the more remote and the more central areas. A summary of these results can be found in table 3.

Table 3 Impact on capability domains: most pronounced differences between donor agencies

Domain	Most remote area (Kiwawa)		Least remote area (Nasukuta)	
	%		%	
Natural	8	ASAL: +; NGOs: -	15	Gov: -
Physical	22	Gov: -; ASAL: +	18	NGOs: +
Human	28	ASAL: -; Churches: +; NGOs: -	21	Gov: -; NGOs: +
Economic	19	Gov: +; ASAL: -; Churches: -	18	Churches: -
Cultural	9	ASAL: -;	12	Gov: +; ASAL -; Churches: +; NGOs: -
Social-political	15	ASAL: -; NGOs: +	16	All donors: average!

+: > 1% more than average for the area; - > 1% less than average for the area

Workshop members were asked to choose ten projects, which they regarded as the best for their area (with the greatest positive impact), and ten projects, which they regarded as the worst for their area (with the greatest negative impact, or the largest difference between expectations and outcome). In total, the workshop participants for ten areas selected 93 'best' projects and 94 'worst' projects. The 'best' and 'worst' scores are presented in table 4.

Table 4; 'Best' and 'worst' projects for 4 types of donors in West Pokot, Kenya

	Best	Worst	Best	Worst
	no.	no.	%	%
Government (n = 161)	11	40	7	25
ASAL (n = 198.5)	20	24	10	12
Churches (n = 338.5)	44	14	13	4
NGOs (n = 141)	18	16	13	11
TOTAL (n = 839)	93	94	11	11

A broad picture emerges of the way the population favoured 'development' interventions from outside. This picture also sheds light on the factors influencing 'commitment', 'ownership' and 'empowerment' by those for whom the interventions are meant, which are concepts, which have figured so prominently in the ideologies of development cooperation. In the Pokot area in general churches are considered to be the best 'development agency' and the government the worst. 'Impact', in the perception of the participants, not only means reaching the targeted results of a project or programme, but also the way the activities were initiated and implemented (the process). Bottom-up managed projects, with a long-term commitment, were valued most positively. The same applies for projects treating the population 'with respect'. Building and maintaining mutual trust and long-term commitment were considered the most valuable quality of aid-providing agencies. In the area under consideration, peace building and providing basic security against violence, including the violence of government agencies, also became important issues. With long-term commitment and trust so central to positive judgements, one wonders about the wisdom of (some) donors to have limited field presences and then only for restricted periods (with or without an 'exit strategy'). Donors that are on the point of leaving are regarded as 'bad', and this clarifies a great deal about the not so positive ex-post attitude towards the ASAL programme. One of the lessons learned is that, in the initial phases of development programmes, considerable energy should be spent on understanding people's behaviour and its cultural roots rather than on concentrating on the functioning of the government machinery. Consequently, one of the major challenges in development cooperation and in development research is to reconcile the 'development focus' and the 'culture focus'. People's ideas about 'vulnerability', 'security', and even 'survival' are not only related to basics like food, shelter and protection from violence, but also to issues of identity. The perception of poverty is rooted in culture as well. In a society in which 'pastoralism' is perceived as the preferred way of life (even if only a small minority of the people can still afford to live that way) any project interventions that support the rebuilding of herds and flocks, and that improve animal health, access to water, and (improved) pasture, tend to be seen as 'good'. However, if donors do not live up to 'promises' in these areas, people are quick to judge these interventions as 'useless', 'negligible', or 'unsustainable'. However, people have also realised that they need additional support mechanisms for survival as a community, and many initiatives to improve their health, education and skills levels have been highly appreciated. However, they also realise that education without the prospects of (local) employment

is a major threat to social cohesion. A large group of educated poor people is already present in the district and they form a basis for a lot of social (and political and cultural) instability. It is a ticking time bomb, which is neglected by most of the development agents. Findings indicate that parents become reluctant (again) to send their children to school. And people generally deplore the withdrawal of 'government' from supporting the productive sector during the 1990s.

### *Mbulu*

In Mbulu an analysis in historical perspective was made of the deteriorating livelihood situation. Most parts of the district are facing increasing land pressure with farmers and pastoralists competing for land, coupled with landlessness and the out-migration of young people occur in a number of areas. Yields are stagnating or declining as a result of soil erosion and environmental degradation. Traditional livestock systems are under threat and a shortage of pastureland, increased livestock diseases, frequent droughts and inadequate veterinary services are all debilitating factors. Social developments were favourable in the 1970s, but there was a decline in the 1980s and there have been no recent signs of improvement. The enrolment rate for primary education dropped and school infrastructure and the quality of education became increasingly inadequate. Healthcare services are unevenly spread over the district and the quality of these services is poor. Safe and clean water is accessible to only 43% of the population. Because of deteriorating economic possibilities there is a social crisis among the young, with widespread theft and alcoholism. The youth tend to reject farming and migrate to towns where they find few viable alternative income opportunities.

In the people's perception, poverty is linked to the degree of harmony in the social relationships in the society. The Hadzabe (hunters and gatherers) attach no meaning to material possessions and they regard the greed of the outside world as a threat to their potential wealth (game) and way of life. For the Barabaig a poor person does not have any cattle and therefore cannot socially reproduce himself. That makes the person insignificant in social terms (very comparable to the situation among the Kenyan Pokot). Among the Iraqw, poverty refers to a lack of food but it also has a social dimension, and deteriorating relations (within the family, between neighbours, in the community), associated with stagnating food production, are perceived as poverty. Irrespective of ethnicity, people's perceptions of poverty differ from those of the government staff and district leaders. The latter perceive poverty in economic terms, in the lack of agricultural output, food shortages and low food security, and low cash incomes. According to all these poverty-related indicators, poverty is on the increase. This is in line with a more formal analysis.

A lot of villagers attribute increasing poverty to the fact that government seems to have relinquished its supervision over agricultural and livestock sectors, particularly agricultural extension and veterinary services. Farmers and herdsmen alike state that crop and cattle diseases have increased of late, that the market situation is deteriorating, and that the private sector has failed to assume the government's former role. Local people are sceptical about local governance. They note a lack of transparency in development planning and the flow of financial resources caused by the hierarchical

top-down process. Young people complain about the corruption of leaders, about the functioning of courts of law, which they consider unpredictable and outside their influence and about the lack of communication between leaders and ordinary citizens.

'Development interventions' have been taking place in Mbulu since early colonial times. They form part of people's collective memory. The biggest and best-remembered interventions concerned the tsetse eradication programmes in the 1930s and 1940s, the cattle de-stocking programme just after World War II and the 'villagisation' campaign of the mid 1970s. The introduction of churches and primary education during colonial times also had a major impact on society. Lawi (in Chachage et al 2001) concluded that the common characteristic of all these interventions was that they were undertaken under pressure from a foreign or local urban elite and that the ideas on which the interventions were based often did not match the realities. From the 1970s and 1980s onward, a new wave of donor-steered village projects washed over Mbulu (RIDEPs). Although traces of agro-forestry are still visible on the eastern hills, in most cases there is no longer any tangible lasting impact from projects like fisheries, hydropower, vegetable gardens and grain-mills. Once again, the intervention agencies had no properly funded ideas on how the population could be 'developed', and the latter were more or less forced to 'participate'. Although some profited, it still did nothing to solve the issue of poverty. When the Dutch-funded MDRDP arrived (the Mbulu District Rural Development Programme), a Danish project vanished without trace and the Catholic Church relocated their social projects to dioceses farther away, with the exception of pastoral help and emergency aid in times of hunger. A number of Protestant churches have recently made their presence felt in Mbulu district, but their activities remain very small-scale. The only substantial projects were the hospital and health services initiated the Lutheran church concentrated in the southern part of the district, while the MDRDP mainly covered more northerly areas. The hospital in Haydom is the best-known and most appreciated development intervention.

The Dutch funded MDRDP dominated the development interventions in the Mbulu district in the 1980s and 1990s. It operated through the District Council. The study mentioned that the programme caused fragmentation because of the increase in activities. Improvements have been made in terms of better soil and water conservation, more effective land management, higher yields, and better varieties and dairy farming. Employment and incomes do not seem to have improved during the 10-15 years studied, nor has food security. Coverage and outreach have remained small and there have been no major breakthroughs in technology or production methods. Crucial functions of a withdrawing state (in the context of structural adjustment policies), were not replaced by a well-functioning market. The MDRDP has hardly done anything to address the decline in public services. In the area of institutional changes there are no clear indications that local government has been strengthened as a result of the MDRDP, although it was (until recently) the major justification for the programme. A self-assessment in 2000 (just before the IOB evaluation) was even slightly negative and referred to the downward accountability of councillors as being questionable, as well as to the limited participation in planning and the fact that most departments did not meet their capacity building targets. The raising of local taxes

(based on the matching principle of Dutch aid in these programmes, which meant that the volume of aid had to match Council investments) has resulted in increased poverty for certain segments of the population.

The stakeholders involved in the programme have different perceptions of the role and impact of the MDRDP. A distinction can be made between the views and opinions of civil service employees (Heads of Departments), elected Councillors, village leaders and villagers. The differences of opinion serve to clarify what is going on in the donor-sponsored development efforts in the district. *Government personnel* and particularly senior district staff share donor views and feel that the lack of financial means and expertise in the district necessitates development aid. They support the need for 'development engineering' through formal planning and expert intervention. They are generally positive about project interventions and attribute shortcomings mainly to delays in the release of donor funds and to conservative views of the farmers. In order to demonstrate the programme's success they refer to the scale or increase of activities undertaken. *Village leaders* tend to agree with district staff but are worried about the consistency and equity of the distribution of activities (they prefer an even distribution of the spread of inputs as their credibility among their supporters depends on this). They operate as brokers between the village and the outside world and are often elected because of their knowledge of government and donors. Their complaints relate to promises that were not kept, agreements that were not fulfilled, and delays caused by government and donors alike. *Councillors* (elected members of the District Council) also lobby to gain as much aid as possible for their constituents. They prefer tangible and visual results like schools, bridges, wells, clinics, and complain that too much money is spent on meetings, seminars and training courses. They express concern about unilateral actions by the donor, namely the extremely strict (unilateral) requirements laid down for planning and programming. They also mention shortcomings on the part of the Council (lack of formal education and experience and dedication of staff, and of number of staff). The *rural population*, the category, which the MDRDP is intended to reach, seems to have quite different expectations of development programmes than the district authorities. Mostly they do not distinguish between donor and government interventions (since aid is channelled through district departments) but, if they do, they see government personnel as an obstacle to an appropriate flow of development resources to the population. They complain about the mishandling of food aid in times of drought and famine (by the Catholic Church and the Council), and of the embezzlement of funds and materials, as well as corruption in general. The opinion of the population can be illustrated by the following quote: *If intervention comes from the top, it never reaches the target group. The group waits but the thing vanishes. We get Clouds but no Rain!* The lack of transparency creates suspicion and distrust of government staff, and the suggestion is: *if the donors want to help us, they should give it directly to the village – as such everybody knows how much money is concerned ... we must shorten communication lines.* In general, they feel that they do not benefit from the activities for which the *development levy* is intended, nor do the interventions result in any production or income increase. To them, the result of the taxation is government exploitation.

From these perceptions a picture emerges about the typical donor-inspired aid architecture whereby funds are channelled through district procedures, and decisions are taken by the higher organisational echelons in spite of principles of 'participation', 'ownership' etc. which were meant to be at the heart of the programme strategy. Parties at each level have their own interests and constraints, and aim to maximise the benefits from that seemingly boundless basket of anonymous donor funds.

### Conclusions based on the evaluations

Although the areas under investigation (West Pokot and Mbulu) are different, and although the intervention agencies differed considerably (even the 'rules of the game' differed considerably between Dutch assistance to the district programmes in Kenya and Tanzania), a few general conclusions may be drawn from their comparison. The evaluation methodology has in both cases resulted in both expected and unexpected conclusions. One conclusion that was similar for both evaluations concerned the disapproval by the potential target groups of the poverty alleviation approach of their own governments. In West Pokot an avalanche of church-based and non-church based NGOs became responsible for a lot of additional development initiatives, quite separate from government and even from the Dutch-sponsored ASAL programme initiatives. The local population judged these initiatives generally in more positive terms. This was particularly the case for churches with a long-term presence in the area. In Mbulu the Dutch-sponsored MDRDP had a much more monopolistic position, and here the church development activities were fewer, and tended to steer clear of government/MDRDP 'strongholds'. It appears that the appreciation of interventions by local stakeholders is often not in the first place based on these interventions reaching their purpose (*effectiveness*) or on their cost-effect relationship (*efficiency*) but on the way the intervention ('the project') was started and executed (*its process*). This emphasis on the style of intervention also includes the measure of 'respect' paid to the target groups, the measure of flexibility in dealing with changing circumstances, the long-term commitment of the intervention agencies, and the susceptibility for local inputs in the decision-making process. In spite of a rather good stakeholder appreciation of the big Dutch-funded programmes, in case the latter adopted the desired style, and in spite of the recognition of their efforts, these programmes have not been able to achieve their goal of alleviating poverty. No appreciable changes have occurred in the economic lives of the majority of the population, although other 'capitals' and 'capabilities' have often improved considerably. The income-oriented and employment-oriented interventions have either been too limited in scope, or too short, or too superficial to have any lasting impact. Often, they have remained restricted to fighting symptoms and have not really focused on the processes, which really caused poverty. Investments in services (water, health, education, women group formation) did have major impacts on mainly human and social-political capabilities of the population (the 'social side of poverty'), but in such one-sided ways that major problems were created for the future. In remote areas like the ones studied in this article, the policy theory behind withdrawing from the productive sector, and leaving that to the private sector, is flawed.

Programme policies hardly ever resulted from any long-term strategy on poverty alleviation, or from a thorough monitoring and evaluation or learning process, or from repeated problem-analysis exercises. It appears that little concern has been shown for understanding poverty (and for understanding it in its cultural context) and its causes and for basing policies and strategies on this knowledge. The appreciated 'bottom-up' principles in the programme approaches were often overruled by policy decisions at higher levels. In West Pokot the programme had to put more emphasis on 'environment' and less on 'productive activities' as a result of donor mores. In Mbulu the programme changed from a focus on the productive sector and increasing the incomes of the population, to a focus on the improvement of the service sector, and finally to a focus on local governance. The changing orientations (each with their proper sectors, priorities, criteria and conditions) were imposed on the programme in a top-down way. Increasingly the programme was supply-driven, inspired by donor ideology. The major donor assumption in the 1990s was that in a liberalized economy the private sector would automatically take over the role of the government on the market. In remote districts in East Africa this (killer) assumption has appeared to be *wishful thinking*. For the reasons mentioned above, the programmes have appeared significantly irrelevant when it comes to solving the poverty in the areas concerned, and its one-sided attention for 'services'. A lack of attention for employment and income generation creates a ticking time bomb in the form of young people who are disillusioned, educated and poor. Moreover, by continually making new demands on economy and governance, the safety valves inherent in the old systems (preferential prices, social securities, checks and balances in the local village administration) were negatively affected, and these are presently replaced by foreign regulations ('codes of conduct', 'contracts', 'tender procedures') in the name of good governance. These regulations have been instituted to enforce integrity. However, neither integrity nor transparency can be guaranteed with these new regulations, and both the local population and donors became increasingly irritated by 'corruption'.

## Reflection

Previous evaluations often focused on the programmes from within these programmes, and on the organizations carrying out 'development activities': their own *reality*, their own *language*, their own *logic*. It was then often concluded that targets and purpose had not been reached. Recommendations were formulated to improve the implementation of the programmes, and to strengthen the organizational capabilities.

Toppling the evaluation perspective, and making both the poverty question and the stakeholder impact assessment of all interventions the points of departure (the stakeholders' *reality*, *language* and *logic*) revealed fundamental problems in the set-up and in the approach to poverty alleviation in 'vulnerable' areas in East Africa. The basic problems in poverty alleviation seem to concern the role of the government, its strategy and procedures – and also the role of donors, or the effect of donor-steered aid. The problematic situation resembles the imposed 'reforms' by bureau-technocrats of the European Union, reforms that are not rooted in the societies of the Union's countries. In several European countries this has caused a lot of people to turn their



backs on the Union, in spite of the fact that all is done with the best of intentions and in the name of benefiting that same public. The benefactors, however, reason from within their own *reality*, *language*, and *logic*, and have been accused of being 'out of touch with reality', or 'alienated from the citizens'.

It so happens that, given the introduction of more centralised forms of development cooperation (Sector Wide Approach, Budget support, Basket funding, etc.), the assumption is that the government that benefits from this kind of aid is capable of dispensing this aid from central to 'decentralised' levels according to broad sector policies or even broader Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (accompanied by elaborate procedures). Another assumption is that the population has been heard and agrees with these programmes (cf 'The Voices of the Poor'), acknowledges their importance, and will therefore 'participate' in them.

The experience with previous programmes in marginal, poor, vulnerable rural areas, like the ones which have been discussed in this article, makes us fear that the donors are drawing on governments even more than before to impose programmes of alien origin on the population, without being able to graft these onto the living environments (the *reality*, the *language* and the *logic*) of the poor population. For the donors, the assumption of dealing with 'good governance' countries (and plenty of funds being available to 'train' lower levels of administration) appears to be a sufficient guarantee for a good programme implementation at those lower levels. The question, however, is who will be accountable and who will be blamed this time when it turns out that the emperors created by the donors (again) have 'new clothes'?

Finally we reflect on the differences and similarities between the Pokot and the Mbulu approaches. Both tried to 'make the people talk', about their perceptions of change (and their assessment of poverty in their area), and about their interpretations of development interventions (and 'development' in different domains of their lives). In Mbulu focus groups were the most important source of assessment, in selected villages, combined with more 'distant' research techniques (e.g. structured interviews), and there was a greater emphasis on key people's opinions and document analysis. In Pokot the three workshops (with their mixed methods) provided most of the information, with this still being integrated in the first two workshops with the opinions of non-local civil servants while, in the last workshops, an attempt was made to be 'as local as possible'. The analysis of other sources of information (e.g. newspaper analysis, and structured interviews) is not included in this paper. An obvious and enduring problem in both Pokot and Mbulu is how to integrate the opinions of the really poor people. In Pokot-style workshops and in Mbulu-style focus groups, discussions tend to be dominated by relatively better-off participants, with more exposure to education and to 'officials'. The sheer number of participants, and explicit attempts to get balanced views, means an excessive 'local elite' bias is avoided.

Compared to the research activities in Mbulu, the workshop method in Pokot is probably more able to tap into the collective memory of all the participants to detect detailed information on more than two decades of change in the area as a whole. Of course, the combination of different types of people helps. There are young and old, men and women, different professions, different education experiences, different religion and – given the high quality 'detective sessions'- it is surprising how much can be

uncovered in a relatively brief period of time. In Pokot, the study covered the whole area and not just a small selection of villages as in Mbulu. Time was taken to fill in the 'puzzle of recent history' (and create an atmosphere of being 'detectives of change and interventions'). However, people had different views on the 'development interventions' applied to the different groups and some groups did not include the 'normal government duties' ('civil servants just being there, without projects, are useless'). A major problem in impact evaluations, the attribution problem, was tackled in a participatory way, by connecting each and every project with the assessment-of-change activity carried out previously and by creating a consistency test by asking for the ten best and the ten worst projects at the end of the exercise. In Mbulu, it was more difficult to solve this attribution problem, although here the combination of a variety of methods created more possibilities for triangulation.

The different backgrounds of the two approaches are important for explaining what could and what could not be done. The research by the University of Amsterdam in West Pokot was undertaken in complete freedom as the study was financed using the university's own funds. The IOB study in Tanzania was, however, financed by the donor of the evaluated programme, after considerable negotiations about the terms of reference. The IOB considers itself 'independent' from the rest of the Ministry, but it was not happy with some of the findings and has omitted all critical remarks about the donor from the final report<sup>7</sup>. This indicates that learning from local stakeholder assessments is not high on the donor agenda. It is interesting to see that, at present, development NGOs are, in particular, trying to develop alternatives to top-down donor-driven approaches to evaluation, although on the sideline of enforced *monitoring and evaluation protocols*, which – in the Netherlands – now go together with the new government-assisted co-financing programmes of Dutch NGOs working in Africa, Asia and the Americas. It is also interesting to see that there is more room for experimentation, and more south-north and university-NGO collaboration with a view to taking 'participatory evaluation' seriously. An example in the Netherlands is the recently started 'tracking local development' initiative of ICCO, Woord en Daad and Prisma, together with the University of Amsterdam, and universities and NGOs in Ghana and Burkina Faso. At a higher level of scale, experiences gained by Oxfam-NOVIB are also interesting (e.g., see Wilson-Grau & Nuñez, 2007). Of course, at international level, Robert Chambers (e.g., 1994) still inspires many colleagues to apply creative solutions to a continuing challenge in development studies (e.g., Brisolaro 1998, and other contributions to the journal 'New Directions for Evaluation') and in studies of societal change in general, including in 'developed' contexts (e.g., Hayward et al. 2000).

We conclude by summarising some methodological recommendations, which are common to many of these studies, even if they apply them in different ways. A basic element is researchers and their target groups should jointly define poverty, since poverty is no uniform concept. Researchers and target groups should also agree on the main factors, which have caused or are causing the poverty in the research area. Since no single programme or project addresses all the factors that cause poverty, and therefore cannot alone be held accountable for changes in the poverty situation of the population, *all* the interventions in a particular area are to be included in the study, which ought, preferably, to cover at least ten, if not twenty or more years. The history

or the process of the interventions has to be studied as well, in relation to events which occurred during their implementation and which determined the *context* of the interventions. Finally, representatives of target groups should get an important voice in reconstructing ‘what happened to them’, and ‘who was involved, with what type of intervention’. They should also be empowered to judge these interventions, using their own assessment criteria. Only an approach like this will enable researchers and target groups to at least try to address the same *reality*, try to speak the same *language*, and try to reason within the same unity of *logic*, or formulated differently: the evaluation activity will then become a process of open and transparent negotiation about values of judgement, and about impacts of activities and their relevance.

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## Notes

- 1 Ton Dietz (University of Amsterdam, AMIDSt; Dept. of Geography, Planning and International Development Studies) and Sjoerd Zanen (MDF Training and Consultancy, Ede, the Netherlands). Acknowledgements: this paper was conceived, following the seminar entitled 'Monitoring and Evaluation in the chain – creating new dialogues', organised in Ede on 14 December 2006 by MDF/Sjoerd Zanen. During this seminar Ton Dietz delivered the keynote speech, which was titled 'Embracing participative evaluation'.
- 2 Cf Dietz (1987), Dietz & de Leeuw (1999), Andiema, Dietz & Kotomei (2002, 2003).
- 3 Dietz et al. (forthcoming).
- 4 Cf Chachage, Koda, Lawi and Mihanjo (2001); IOB no. 296 (2004).
- 5 Recently the District has been split in North Pokot, West Pokot and Central Pokot. The workshops covered the whole of current North Pokot, and the dryland parts of current West Pokot District.
- 6 Basic data in Andiema et al, 2002. For Kiwawa a first analysis (with many more details than included in this paper) has been presented in Andiema et al., 2003. A further analysis of the results of all three workshops and other research activities will be presented in a book about twenty years of development interventions in West Pokot (Dietz et al, forthcoming).
- 7 All data in this text are taken from the official IOB publication (2004).