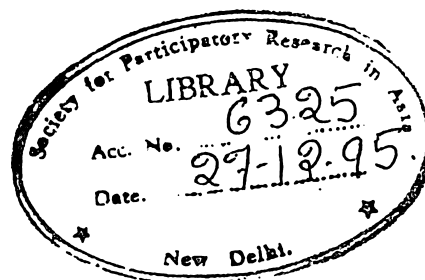


PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION IN ADULT EDUCATION

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November 1994



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There is an interesting debate going on currently through the journal of Adult Education and Development on issues related to evaluation of adult education programmes world wide. Many important issues have been raised in this debate. This reflection note is intended to contribute further to this debate.

Limited Concern

Perhaps the most important starting point in evaluation of adult education programmes is to look at the experience of evaluation itself. Bulk of this experience seems to indicate that evaluation of development programmes in general, and adult education programmes, in particular, has so far been the concern primarily of Programme Managers and Donors. Programme Managers are 'worried' about evaluation as a way of defining the nature of programmes, assessing their impact and justifying the use of resources in support of those activities. It is, therefore, not surprising that as part of their responsibilities, many programme managers feel obligated to undertake systematic evaluation efforts.

Another constituency which is concerned about evaluation is that of the donors. There is an increasing demand on donors to demonstrate effective ways of utilisation of resources in support of development programmes, in general, and adult education initiatives, in particular. In many cases, these donors are themselves intermediaries, either receiving support from their governments or from public at large. And in the current context of international relations, there is an increasing trend towards questioning the validity and usefulness of international aid. As a result, it has become obligatory on the part of donors to systematically examine the impact of resources being applied to a variety of adult education programmes world-wide.

Expanding Concern

Besides these constituencies, the existing concerns of evaluation have not really translated to the concern of either field educators themselves working in the adult education programmes or to the learners who are directly the 'beneficiaries' of such development interventions and adult education programmes. This is the first and perhaps the most crucial challenge in the field of evaluation at this stage. How to encourage educators in the field to look at evaluation as an integral and ongoing part of their own work? How can educators look at their educational efforts in a manner that incorporates in an ongoing way, the process of reflection, analysis, assessment and evaluation. Much of the reality on the ground seems to indicate that this is not the case. Educators in the field participate in evaluation because their programme managers and donors feel obligated to conduct evaluation exercises.

Likewise, the learners themselves in an adult education programme are not actively engaged in an ongoing evaluation of their own experience, their own learning and the impact that learning makes in their lives. Even though learners participate in the evaluations conducted by Programme Managers, it is more as information providers and respondents than as active agents of their own learning. This is a particular dilemma in adult education programmes. The purpose of that adult education intervention is to promote learning of such groups and community of learners. The real issue, therefore, is how can evaluation be separated from an ongoing process of learning? In the final analysis, evaluation itself is expected to contribute to that ongoing process of learning. Viewed in this sense, participatory evaluation in adult education programmes is the basis of ensuring effectiveness of adult education activities itself. The purposes of both participatory evaluation and adult education programme is to support the learning of the group of learners in order for them to transform their own life. This trend of participatory evaluation of adult education programme can only be promoted and practiced if concrete efforts are made to encourage conditions which will help in the active role of the learners and of their field educators in integrating evaluation as an ongoing part of the adult education effort. It is because of this gap, both in conceptualization and in practice, that much of the evaluation efforts in adult education programmes remain a mechanical exercise of reporting the results of the delivery of the programmes itself. Even though progress of learners is evaluated, it remains a mere mechanical exercise. It fails to establish the links of that learning to the improvements in the life of the learners themselves.

Purposes

This is the next important issue in the field of evaluation in adult education programmes. This has to do with the definition of the roles and functions of adult education programme itself. If we look at a broader purpose of adult education then it has to go beyond the learning of the 3Rs and another set of skills (in relation to health care or enlargement of economic enterprise, or whatever). Mere learning of skill of acquisition of information as the immediate objective of any adult education programme does not define the broader purpose of intervention in the life of that group of learners, particularly when such adult education interventions are made with the disadvantaged sections of the community. They have to carry a broader purpose with them of improving the lives of the members of that section. How acquisition of new information or skill contributes to those improvements in the life and work of disadvantaged communities through the provision of an adult education programme is rarely explicated or assessed. As a result, essential delivery of adult education programme becomes the main focus of any evaluation exercise. It does not help to answer the question whether that adult education intervention itself was appropriately conceptualized and utilised in the ongoing life of the members of the disadvantaged community. Where adult education programme is seen as a component of professional training and re-training of practitioners, development workers, and adult educators

themselves, it may be possible to stop by evaluating the actual learning acquired by the participants. But that is not the case when adult education interventions are aimed at improving the life of disadvantaged sections of the community. In order for evaluation to address this purpose, it implies that the planning of adult education programme must explicitly state the assumption underlying the design of the programme in relation to its potential impact on the lives of the learners. Many a times programme design makes a set of assumptions. For example, it is assumed that learning of 3Rs, will improve access to development resources or that acquisition of new information and skill will result in empowerment of the community. But it is rarely explicated high how that new knowledge or skill seems to be resulting in improvements in their life or empowerment, as defined by the programme itself.

Threats

Assuming that an adult education programme is able to make such broader purposes explicit and define the assumption on which the design of the programme is made, even then there are problems associated with promoting the active role of learners and field educators as agents of evaluation exercise. From our experience several threats to authentic reflection and evaluation by learners and field educators operate on the ground. The first set of threats relate to external context in which the programme is implemented. This context comprises of socio-political as well as cultural aspects of the situation in which adult education programme is being implemented. By and large, the conditions obtaining in the socio-political and cultural context in a developing country situation are such that they promote greater reliance on technical expertise and a general devaluation of indigenous capacity. As a result, professionally trained and certified evaluators are viewed by people at large as the only competent authority to conduct systematic evaluation. Even when there is an interest to use the results of such an evaluation in improving programme design and delivery, there is an implicit assumption that an evaluation carried out by 'experts' is far more valid and authentic than a participatory evaluation exercise which makes the learners and field educators as primary agents of the process of evaluation.

The second set of threats to such an authentic reflection arise from resource providers. By and large, donors are interested in narrow technical aspects of evaluation which relate to efficient delivery of programme activities and appropriate utilisation of resources. In this view, evaluation is seen as an exercise that is conducted after the programme has been implemented, within a narrow time-frame, so that the result of the evaluation can be utilised to prepare the proposal for the second phase of the programme. It then assists the resource providers and donors in justifying continued support to the programme itself. Such an approach on behalf of the donors constrains the process of evaluation itself in two significant ways. Firstly, it make evaluation exercise a separate event following the programme delivery, thereby discouraging its integration in the planning and actual implementation of the programme itself. Secondly, the

time constraint guided by the needs to apply the result of the evaluation to the decisions of further funding of the programme necessitate mere examination of efficient delivery and outcome of the delivery of programme itself. It does not provide for the space and the time needed to witness, record and analyse the impacts of adult education programme.

The third set of threats to authentic reflection and evaluation arise from the nature and the culture of the organisation which is implementing adult education programme. It is our experience that participatory evaluation requires a set of condition in the culture and style of functioning of the organisation which encourage questioning, reflection, analysis on an ongoing basis. Many development agencies are not designed in this fashion. Their internal organisational culture and hierarchy tends to reduce the possibility of openness with regard to analysis, questioning and reflections, particularly at the field levels. In such a hierarchical and rigid organisational context, it is not easy, if not impossible, to energise and catalyze a process of authentic reflection and evaluation of ongoing programme and activity which make the field educators and the learners themselves as the primary agents of such an assessment.

Lastly, the fourth set of threats to authentic reflection arise from the personal condition of the educators and learners themselves. In our experience, learners coming from disadvantaged community have a sense of low 'self-esteem' to begin with. They consider themselves, as a consequence of decades of domination, incapable of critical reflection and analysis. In fact, they look at their educators and programme managers as 'depository' of all knowledge and thereby the only experts to conduct such evaluation. This is the common characteristic of such learners; in fact, it provides one of the rationales for implementing adult education programmes with them. Therefore, special efforts are needed to help the learners acquire a sense of comfort in becoming agents of their own evaluation and feeling confident to comment on the processes and mechanisms of the adult education programme in which they are participating.

A similar situation obtains with most field educators who, in our situation, are similar in their background and context to many of the disadvantaged learner communities themselves. The only difference in many situations is that field educators are somewhat more literate and have had a little more exposure to the outside world than the learners themselves. But they also have a rather low sense of self-esteem and feel inadequate in undertaking systematic and critical assessment of their efforts and that of the programme in which they are involved.

The above issues seems to suggest that a major challenge in promoting participatory evaluation in adult education programme in our kinds of situation is to demystify the concept of evaluation, on the one hand, and to create favourable conditions for making evaluation an integral part of any adult education programme design and implementation. Promotional role with programme managers, donors, field educators and the learners themselves becomes far more important as an early step before

specific skills or tools in participatory evaluation can be utilised. This is a major adult education project in itself which may help in demystification of evaluation exercise and helping its integration in programme design and implementation. It is this challenge that adult educators need to face as a starting point. If any programme design automatically includes a budget statement of how the resources will be utilised and generated, then it should be possible to make a similar automatic component of programme design, the manner, process and tools by which ongoing and integral evaluation in adult education will be conducted.