

Testing the Beneficiary Assessment methodology in the context of external project evaluation

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The Context

The rural development programme SAHA (Sahan'Asa Hampandrosoana ny eny Ambanivohitra) started in 2000. The programme aims to contribute to reduce poverty and to improve local livelihoods in the 3 rural regions of Imerina, Betsileo and Menabe in Madagascar. During the two first phases (2000-2006), the programme was working at micro level, supporting initiatives from grassroots organizations. While being assessed as having good results on the livelihoods of poor people, the programme has been questioned regarding its outreach and sustainability. Therefore, a major change of the approach was done, the programme working at meso level and supporting apex organizations in their role was supposed to increase the outreach and to improve the prospects for sustainability. The SAHA programme works through the PALIs (direct partner organisations such as communes, inter communal organisations, associations of communes, apex civil society organisations and apex farmers organisations) which themselves provide support for a number of grassroots associations. The PALIs support their members through capacity building programmes, but also through the realisation of investments and infrastructure development (school buildings, roads etc..). SAHA also works with other development partners, the PASTRA and PAPAR (strategic partners and partners of partners) to stimulate systemic change at higher level and to help support development activities. SAHA's approach is very much one of enabling rather than doing and for example SAHA responds to demand rather than generates it and when SAHA provides part of the funding for a road construction it leaves its partner to manage the whole project from start to finish and the monitoring is ensured through a '*comite de pilotage*', (executive committee) which includes all the relevant stakeholders. SAHA also uses Outcome Mapping to monitor attitudinal change amongst the PALIs which has also stimulated greater self-awareness.

The programme will end on the 31.12.2012 and the East Africa division has decided to commission a final evaluation covering the last two phases (2007-2012, CHF 23Mio). The

objective of the external evaluation was to establish possible links between changes identified by the communities (in governance and economic development) and the direct or indirect impacts of the SAHA programme.

In order to put the emphasis on the impacts of the programme at the local level, and to verify the hypothesis on which the change of scale of the programme (increase outreach and improve sustainability while maintaining the effects at the level of the population) was based, the division together with the Quality Assurance (QA), decided to combine an external evaluation with a Beneficiary Assessment (BA) in order to integrate and consider impacts from the perspective of the populations themselves. The use of the BA was motivated by an interest at the QA, in adapting the BA approach to an evaluation context and to test its relevance and effectiveness in the context of programme evaluation. The outcomes and lessons of this experience are presented in this paper.

How did the BA work?

The BA was organised in 3 phases:

- A preparation phase which included a 5 day workshop focussing on team building, decision making about the content and the focus of the BA and the planning of the data collection phase, and a pilot exercise to test and finalise the tools and approaches;
- The data collection phase, organised over 9 weeks in 2 regions and 18 communities (see table 1 for detail on process);
- The analysis phase which included a 6 days analysis workshop, and 3 days of feedback of the BA results to a number of stakeholders in 2 regions and at the national level. The Citizen Observers (COs, see below) presented their findings to PALIs and local development actors in the 2 regions where the field work had taken place and finally to SAHA and some of their guests. This was an opportunity for the COs to express their views and also to hear the views of others. The results of these feedback sessions were then discussed in a final wrap up session with the COs. All the COs received a compilation of the 18 field reports and a copy of the consolidated analytical report in Malagasy.

This BA process involved the following actors:

- 18 citizen observers (COs) working in trios, selected by SAHA or its partners following a set of selection criteria defined in the ToRs of the COs. The group included 9 men and 9 women, all literate (to more or lesser degrees) and most spoke some French (with

more or lesser degree of fluency). Also most of them were involved in one way or another with various community development activities, some playing governance roles within grassroots organisations or at the local administrative level (one was a counsellor of her commune, one president of the fokontany). Only 3 were considered as ‘vulnerables’ the programme term for very poor;

- 2 facilitators (1 international consultant focusing on the preparation and analysis phase and 1 national consultant providing also support during the data collection phase);
- A pool of resource persons providing support during the BA design phase at SAHA, SDC and IDS.

The trios worked in their own communities and at time in a neighbouring community, not necessarily home to one of the OC (see Annexe 1). The choice of the regions for the BA was made by SAHA and was a compromise between criteria such as the distance between communities (so as to make it logistically possible to supervise 6 teams or trios), the location where SAHA had intervened and plans to continue intervening and the distance from Antananarivo (5 hours drive). The concept of community was difficult to define as sometimes it referred to an administrative unit (such as the commune or the fokontany) a hamlet which may spread over a number of fokontanys or a group of individuals linked to an association of producers. Ultimately the trios worked at the level of the fokontany and visited 18 different fokontanys covering 21 associations and 3 VOI¹ (grassroots NRM organisations).

The trios agreed on a time table for the field work (see table 1) which would allow 2 weeks delays between the visit to different communities to allow the COs to rest, to attend to their personal business (as it was felt that mobilising people for 3 consecutive weeks might prove difficult and too tiring) and also to have time to reflect and perhaps improve their process. 2 trios worked during the same weeks and this allowed for the national consultant to see all teams and attend the field feedback at least once for every trio during the 9 weeks; it also had the extra bonus of having two trios meet to exchange and learn from each other at the end of their week.

Table 1: Data collection time table 25th June- 25th August 2012

Trio	Weeks	Mon-Wed	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
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¹ Vondron’Olona Ifotony or grassroots organisation focusing on natural resource management.

1 & 6	2, 4 & 7	Data collection	Individual Trio analysis	2 trio analysis with national consultant	Community level feedback
3 & 4	1, 5 & 8	Data collection	Individual Trio analysis	2 trio analysis with national consultant	Community level feedback
2 & 5	3, 6 & 9	Data collection	Individual Trio analysis	2 trio analysis with national consultant	Community level feedback

The framing of the BA was kept to a minimum so as to influence the process as little as possible. The only information provided to the trios at the beginning of the workshop, was that an external review would take place jointly and use the results of the BA. The emphasis was on hearing from the COs own voice what their perspectives on the changes in their context were. What was important was what they may want to ask (ie define their own evaluation questions) and find out for themselves what could be of interest to them. The COs were not to consider themselves in a position of working for the evaluation team but for themselves. After a reflective exercise By the end of the first week of workshops based on reflective exercises, the COs chose 5 key themes, governance, security, gender and vulnerability, impacts and sustainability (which overlapped with some the themes selected for the external evaluation ToRs) to focus their evaluation on.

During this entire process SAHA provided financial support for the national facilitation, the logistic, the training events and the COs were given a small daily amount to compensate for their time. It had been initially decided that this amount should be the equivalent of what a CO would need to pay someone else to do their work during the time they were involved in the process (so that they would not be out of pocket). In practice SAHA operated its normal official per diem rate which was higher than a day's wage but also not too high as to be the only incentive for a CO to be motivated to take part. Similarly, the PALIs representatives who attended the feedback sessions in the regions were given an attendance allowance.

The Outcomes

The BA process

The field work was completed by all trios and 18 field reports were available on schedule with information covering all five themes. Everyone stayed on board and 17 COs attended

the second analysis workshop. One CO could not attend because she was attending another training during the same period and one CO was delayed by 2 days for family reasons. The task was completed diligently and in itself this is a very positive outcome. It could be sheer luck that no one fell ill or was called elsewhere during the period (this is also a busy period in the region for family rituals which can last days) but also could be due to the interest and the motivation of the COs. In general, throughout the process, the COs have been positively engaged, contributing, asking questions and working in a focused and inclusive manner. The feedback provided by the COs (see Annexe 1) shows that COs were essentially motivated to participate thanks to a sense of duty and responsibility towards their community or organisation, and saw the opportunity to learn, access some form of training which would help them understand the local reality. This focus on learning and building capacity (at a personal and organisational level), to make a link between increased understanding and ability to contribute to local development is also the message conveyed strongly about the benefits from taking part in the BA process. Whilst reflecting on the process itself and the methods used, the COs mostly commented that it is the combination of a training element (workshop 1), the experiential dimension of doing field work in teams and exchanging with other trios and communities, and the analytical and reflective processes which made the BA a positive and enriching experience.

There was great value in organising feedback sessions. Whilst it has been difficult to get a sense of how valuable (for the COs or the local people) it was to provide feedback at community level (because this process was not documented) the feedback at regional and programme levels was apparently very useful and empowering. The preparation for the presentation forced the COs to be more synthetic, analytical and to choose the seminal messages they wanted to convey; during the presentations themselves it was clear that the audience was interested and captive and the COs delegated by the group to present did fantastic presentations (fairly short and to the point, some visualisation, humour, simple and direct messages). The presentations were followed by facilitated small group discussions on the theme of 'how to build on the messages' and resulted in animated discussions on concrete processes and possible collaboration to put in place to start the dissemination outside the SAHA area of the benefits of the programme in term of good governance. Though the COs were a bit anxious before presenting their results to the PALIs, they were ultimately comfortable and listened to. The COs have seen that reflecting at the regional level is different from the national level because actors play different roles and can have different

degree of influence on future processes; they also saw this as an opportunity to challenge actors on their responsibility. COs also valued the possibility to connect with higher levels at national level as the communication pathways make it difficult for the grassroots to pass messages to that level. Feedback from the audience was also very positive especially from the SAHA programme staff who felt gratified, not just because the feedback was overall positive but also they could see concrete changes in beneficiaries.

BA findings: The Chain of results

The BA report is a very rich document including detailed information on the 5 themes: governance, gender and vulnerability, security, impact and sustainability. Through an iterative analytical process the COs sketched the broad lines of the chain of results linking these themes together. The COs saw that thanks to good governance, communes are able to deliver better services: not only the tenure (guichet foncier) and registry office contribute to the strengthening of citizen rights, but the better management of the commune reinforces the trust of citizens who are then more likely to pay their taxes. Tax recovery has been one of the focus of awareness raising and an increase of fiscal income has allowed an increase of communal investments but also a strategic planning. Participatory budgeting institutionalised in all SAHA communes, ensures that expenses and investments are more relevant but also that citizens understand that not everything can be done at once. This planning allows, the COs say, for the development of community development vision, which in turn also reinforces trust. Communal expenses are diverse and cover social development needs (primary health care, food aid for the poorest or the building of schools) but also support economic development through roads and market square development. A better management at the communal level has also reinforced the trust from other actors such as the state actors or NGOs which are more likely to support requests for development actions.

COs also comment that the principles of transparency, participation and accountability can now be found within the management of associations which are now performing better. These associations are more likely to be formally registered and are recognised by the state, have clear rules and regulations and are committed to report to their members on a regular basis and have clear plans. This too results in the increased likelihood of accessing funding or support (for capacity building for example) from external sources. The improved capacity of the associations leads to increase economic development which is the other component of the SAHA programme.

The programme has supported the development of value chains in different goods such as potatoes, peas, beans or fisheries. One flag ship is SAHALANDY an association federating a number of smaller associations working in the silk commodity chain. COs cite SAHALANDY as one example of how better organisational governance (through strategic planning, regular reporting and fund raising) has helped developing human resources, but also to find markets and diversify production. Traditionally raw silk was used to prepare shrouds but gradually the weavers have started working on scarves which are now also sold abroad. Associations have on average 8 members but each of these members employs a number of spinners who are non-members but who from time to time benefit from trainings offered through SAHALANDY.

For COs the institutionalisation of good governance at local administrative level and at the level of associations will increase the chance of sustainability because these improved practices lead to new systems of management which are gradually shifting people's behaviour and attitude leading to increased responsabilisation of citizens in running their own affairs. There is the COs say a 'can do' self-belief which is becoming more common.

The context however brings a number of threats; the political crisis which partly fuels uncertainty and inflation; the poorest are hardest hit as wages stagnate and occasional employment opportunities becomes rarer. This has a knock on effect the fiscal revenue of communes which in turns threatens implementation of the strategic vision. The gradual retreat of the state directly linked to the crisis also makes it harder to control abuse of the law. Companies (such as mining companies) are often not paying their taxes to the local communes and more worryingly insecurity with increased crime and harvest or cattle thefts has negative economic effects: people spend too much energy trying to protect their crops (though tiring night vigils) and hesitate to invest and take risks. This means that the logical economic impacts of the value chain development are less noticeable than they should be.

COs also see resistance to change from some section of society which threatens progress. They talk about 'people who do not want to share their knowledge' but also about people who occupied too many strategic positions in various organisations and who then undermine the progress of good governance. They also see the difference between the area which has benefitted from the programme input and others and are concerned about a 'two-tiers' development process.

Gender is one of SAHA's cross cutting theme and is suitably present at each levels of the analysis. Good governance demands that all, men and women are equally involved and the COs reflect on how the attitude towards women and their role in local development has changed for the better. Economic development for association members has also brought 'more harmony within the households' though at the same time women's increasing involvement in public affairs can also bring tensions has husbands feel at time threatened. This COs say is the reason why the gender approach needs to be sustain as addressing men and women's issues jointly is necessary and beneficial for all.

Usefulness of BA and Lessons learned

Positive outcomes

The report produced by the COs provided an alternative source of information, alongside SAHA reports and observations gathered during interviews by the external evaluator. The iterative process during the analysis helped shaping the evaluator's understanding of the context in a more dynamic way; it provided a 'living narrative' in that the COs were sharing their experience and their perceptions about their experience which gave the stories more depth and a more refined quality (as compared to examples mentioned in a report). In shaping the vision, the process of building the report, also provided lenses through which to read the other sources (SAHA reports and evaluator's observations), it helped in making connections: in a way the COs report provided the direction for data analysis.

The BA report provided robust data in the sense that the results of each trios was triangulated with the results of other trios and the analytical process generated plenty of opportunity for the CO's data to be challenged by other trios. Many of the trios' findings are also corroborated in SAHA reports and the evaluator's own observations. This convergence validates the data and shows that the process can produce robust data. The best example of the 'validation' is the fact that out of 5 themes, 4 had been identified by SAHA as central themes for the programme. At the same time, the focus on the theme of security, which is not yet central to PALIs or Communes activity is an example of how people at the grassroots can add dimensions to the subject under analysis.

Challenges

- Limitations of the BA

The COs selected did not include ‘normal’ citizens in the sense that all were already active in their community, members of various associations benefiting from SAHA’s support at some point. This influenced the outcome in two ways;

1) The COs structured their investigation from the standpoint of associations, focusing their attention more on what was happening within associations and to their members, rather than systematically enlarging their attention to the general public. This was noticed and discussed during the pilot phase but somewhat during the fieldwork, the COs maintained their focus on associations. For example the Gender theme was almost exclusively approached from an organisational perspective, explaining what the organisations were doing for gender rather than exploring gender changes (and impact) in society.

2) The absence of illiterate people and citizens not involved in any community activity may have skewed the choice of themes and questions but also possibly of the choice of tools. The almost exclusive use of flipcharts during feedback sessions and reliance on writing rather than drawings or alternative forms of communications might have been avoided if the trios had included more people not used to writing. By being literate and familiar with training workshops COs may have lost sight of illiterate people and possibly were not confident to explore other communication methods.

Despite the robustness, the data has three major limits:

1) It does not cover all domains necessary to answer the external evaluation questions. Given the COs’ links with grassroots organisations their focus was almost entirely on organisational matters and on governance issues, thus leaving end users and economic questions to some degree out of their focus (though issues related to value chains emerged during the feedback sessions). Many contextual issues were mentioned and discussed, but for example the analysis fell short of exploring power relations which could be due to the fact that many COs themselves occupy positions of power within their own organisations or communities; some may argue that hoping that COs would verbally articulate power relations is ambitious but ultimately it is arguably the necessary step towards meaningful empowerment².

² Freire, P 1970 Pedagogy of the oppressed, Penguin: London

2) The data remains essentially qualitative and descriptive and the partial vagueness of Outcome Mapping outputs used by SAHA is also present in the BA report as COs have found it difficult to frame the information in terms of concrete stories related to specific impacts;

3) There is a difficulty to make the difference between *outcomes* and *impacts* and to document impacts by showing the links between inputs, outputs and outcomes. From the external evaluation perspective the COs did not sufficiently focus on impacts and thus the report includes limited information relevant and helpful to test the impact hypothesis.

These limits (especially 1 and 3) are inherent to the BA process in that the citizens are free to choose their focus and will analyse the context from their own perspective. This is where the discussion about the composition of the teams becomes relevant again as more diverse teams might have produced a more exhaustive vision. However even in this case one cannot control the group's interests and guaranty that they will match the external evaluation focus. To some extent the analytical capacity of COs at grassroots (and rural) level may often be uncritical and knowing what kind of evidence may be needed to support a chain of results exercise comes only with experience. This can be partially overcome during the training phase where terms such as impacts or chain of results can be defined and a common definition negotiated; there is however no guaranty that once in the field COs will have the discipline to systematically collect the appropriate evidence.

Overall the COs have commented that the scope of the data collection (only 3 communities by trio) was too restricted and they would have liked to enlarge their sample to understand better the differences between places. Some also reflected that their investigation may have lacked the depth at times, partly due to the difficulty in finding available interviewees. The timing of the data collection may not have been the best one due to the seasonal family rituals which keep people busy. Another major concern was the follow up; COs were wondering about what would happen next, whether there would be some follow up ; for example it was suggested that revisiting the same communities after some time would allow to see whether issues raised during the community level feedback had any consequence.

- Combining BA and external evaluation

Facilitating the BA process and conducting the external evaluation as two simultaneous parallel processes was difficult because:

- 1) the facilitation of the BA took almost all the time allocated to the external evaluation which meant that the triangulation work was limited
- 2) whilst the BA report is a positive contribution, its inherent limits compromises the potential of relying on the report to test the impact hypothesis;

In the case of an external evaluation, the BA process should be facilitated before the external evaluation takes place so that there is time and space for the external evaluator to design an evaluation methodology consistent with the hypothesis to be tested whilst at the same time considering to a large extent the results of the BA.

Enabling factors

One very important, central ingredient of the success of the method is the quality of facilitation. The BA process is based on the principle of participation where COs take the lead whilst at the same time they also need to be led through a number of methodological steps. There is always a fine line between probing without suggesting and proposing without constraining the process. The bulk of the discussions happened in Malagasy without French translation. This limited translation process relied on trust and allowed the COs to express themselves freely.

The weekly field meetings with the national consultant were also important to maintain the documentation of the results on the computer and to provide a supportive but not interfering presence during the process. COs commented that it was important not to be left alone during the process.

Can BA be useful in my work?

There is no doubt that the BA offers tremendous opportunity for M&E processes: this example has shown the ability and local people's interest in their own affairs and has reconfirmed the empowering potential of participatory processes. The COs have been able to create a report which reflects their collective vision of their own context and they have conveyed messages which others (SAHA staff and representatives of PALIs and other partners attending the workshops) have found relevant and useful. Despite its limitations, the content of the report is also useful for the external evaluation in that it provides a lens through which to make sense of other sources of information necessary to conduct an evaluation. The participatory principles of the BA process could also serve as a basis to set up a COs-led M&E system complementary to the Outcome Mapping.

Ultimately the strength of the BA lies in the participatory process itself. It is clear from the COs feedback, the dynamics during the public feedback with the PALIs and other partners that the COs went through a genuine discovery journey: they gradually realised their ability, the value of conducting this type of investigation, the potential of sharing ideas at their level with peers in theirs and other communities. Many found this inspiring and it gave them motivation to look ahead and see how they could capitalise on this event. The COs have discussed the possibility of creating an association to join forces focusing on providing support to others in future citizen-led evaluations.

ANNEXE 1: ADDITIONAL REFLECTIONS and INFORMATION

Location of fieldwork

Trio 1 et 6 : Mahazina-Anjoman' Ankona

Enquêtes effectuées dans : 4 Communes rurales, 15 Fokontany, 15 associations

Trio 2 et 5 : Antsirabe-Ambohibary-Faratsiho

Enquêtes effectuées dans : 1 Commune rurale, 1 Fokontany, 3 VOI (gestion de ressources naturelles), 1 association (filère pommes de terre)

Trio 3 et 4 : Miarinavaratra-Sandrandahy

Enquêtes effectuées dans : 1 Commune rurale, 5 associations

The choice of COs

One aspect of the COs selection was perhaps the communication gap between SAHA head quarter and the field level: in one commune, it seems people reported that the criteria for the selection were, 1 person gender sensitive, 1 person from outside the commune, and one who knows the commune. In another case a PALI was told to select people to conduct an external evaluation for SAHA and that the trios should include a woman and 1 vulnerable; for the other cases it seems SAHA teams at the local level contacted potential COs directly without the commune or the PALIs being informed. Some gaps of communications are common and possibly difficult to completely eliminate. Earlier direct connection between the evaluator and the SAHA team may also have helped in framing the importance of the CO choice.

The feedback sessions of COs on the process

During the week at different moments, COs were asked to spend 5-10 minutes answering individually in writing the following questions: what were your motivations to take part to the BA process?; what did you gain from the process?; what were the positive elements of the BA process (in terms of timing, logistics, amount and quality of facilitation etc.); What are the shortcomings of the BA process? At the end of the 3 weeks of data collection methods the SNC also facilitated a short brainstorming session on what had worked, and worked less well during the process and the lessons drawn from the process. On the final day there was also a reflective wrap up session on the process.

The COs critique of the process.

Overall COs were satisfied with the process but raised a few concerns. The timing of the data collection may not have been the best one due to the seasonal family rituals which keep people busy. Another major concern was the follow up; they were wondering about what would happen next, whether there would be some follow up ; for example it was suggested that revisiting the same communities after some time would allow to see whether issues raised during the community level feedback had any consequence. There is a sense in the responses that the COs have been wondering about how to capitalise on the process, for themselves (in terms of new skills they have gained) and for the communities in terms of new insights or knowledge they may have gained from interacting with the trios.

During the field work there was also anxiety before the feedback at local level as the feedback sometimes generated questions to which the COs did not have answers. They were also worried about presenting their results to the PALIs because they felt that the PALIs may already know what they wanted to share. However there was gradual realisation that their role was not to come up with solutions but to reflect to others their own perceptions in order to stimulate in others a thinking process. This seemed to work as the SNC reported that people, during the feedback sessions at community level made comments to that effect. One CO used the metaphor of taking a picture and showing back the picture to the community photographed.