PCIA Methodology: A Development Practitioner's Perspective

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This dialogue paper was written in reaction to Mark Hoffman's article and Kenneth Bush's response paper for the Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation. It aims to contribute to the ongoing methodological discourse from a development practitioner's perspective. A perspective that can be characterized by result orientation, creation of measurable benefits, cost-effectiveness considerations, and persistent issues of legitimisation towards partners in the host country vis-à-vis tax payers at home. In short, it is a perspective which is very much concerned with monitoring and evaluation of inputs, activities, outputs, the use of outputs and the assessment of outcomes and impacts.

The paper takes up some of the methodological issues that have been raised in the academic argument between Hoffman and Bush and discusses them on the basis of the PIMU (Poverty Impact Monitoring Unit)/ CEPA (Centre for Poverty Analysis) experience.

I. Observations on the Hoffman-Bush Discourse

Hoffman provides a well-structured overview and discussion of different approaches to PCIA that have been evolved over the last five years. He distinguishes approaches based on standard evaluation criteria, those that develop methodologies for assessing peace and conflict impact of development, and finally those that focus on specific interventions by conflict resolution and peacebuilding NGOs. It concludes that PCIA "should be an important and useful tool for any practitioner that must respond effectively to conflict situations."

However, to date, PCIA is far from being a useful tool as the gap between the conceptual design and the practice has not yet been closed. Hoffman himself identifies a number of issues with the current methodological developments that need to be addressed:

- the articulation of usable criteria and indicators,
- the linkages and interconnections between different types and levels of evaluations,

- the need for understanding the contexts, conditions, and circumstances, and
- the account of different sectors and their dynamic interactions.

Kenneth Bush, in his response to Hoffman's article criticises that it is not appropriate at all to discuss PCIA by summarising "some methodological details" and coming up with "four relatively technocratic points to bear in mind in the subsequent development of PCIA". For him PCIA is fundamentally political and needs to be treated in a political and not in a technical manner. Bush argues that "...the idea of PCIA was seized upon by a number of bilateral and multilateral donors. Emphasis shifted from the original organic Southern-led learning process to a mechanistic Northern-led quest for mainstreamable products (tools, frameworks, manuals, indicators – especially indicators – etcetera)." (Bush, in this volume, p. 39)

From a development practitioner's perspective one tends to conclude cautiously that any serious evaluation or impact assessment is both a highly political as well as a technical task. This is even more so if the impact of development projects on peacebuilding and conflict transformation in conflict zones is at stake. Nevertheless, in order to cope with these challenges, we need an appropriate analytical framework that is sensitive to political, social, economic, and institutional changes caused and/or stimulated by external interventions.

II. Need for a Practical Framework

Existing PCIA frameworks are often neither specific nor do they propose convincing practical approaches. They often remain vague with respect to the relationship between development cooperation and violent conflicts. In addition, the objectives of the various PCIA approaches that are proposed differ significantly. While some view peacebuilding as a development goal (Reychler 1998 and Warner 1999), others like Bush stress peacebuilding as an impact. Bush proposes five areas of potential peace and conflict impact which can help us to ask the right questions when assessing a specific situation:

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- institutional capacity to manage/ resolve violent conflict and to promote tolerance and build peace,
- military and human security,
- political structures and processes,
- economic structures and processes, and
- social reconstruction and empowerment.

As development cooperation should "do no harm", not even unintentional, a systematic and continuous monitoring and assessment of impacts is indispensable. But do we really need single-issue methodologies or rather a common impact assessment framework that would help to streamline data collection and stakeholder consultations (Leonhardt, 1999)?

From a pragmatic and rather general point of view there is a need for a common framework for impact assessment with specific additions and routines that deal adequately with crucial crosscutting themes such as poverty, gender, environment *and* conflict. Furthermore, impact assessment needs to be integrated into the Project Management Cycle with the aim to monitor (positive and negative, intended and unintended) impacts of the project/programme/policy on the beneficiaries as well as the socio-economic and political context of interventions with respect to the immediate project goal and predefined crosscutting dimensions.

In our view, and this is nourished by experience, we need a common analytical framework for impact assessment that enables donors and partners to

- assess intended as well as unintended impacts,
- help to understand the processes leading to the observed impacts,
- stimulate learning processes among the beneficiaries, local communities and institutions, and the donor community ,
- identify impacts at project, intermediate institutions, and policy level,
- shed light on the nature and dynamics of sectoral inter-linkages,
- strengthen local ownership and participation,
- involve stakeholders,
- guide actions in a transparent manner, and
- remain affordable.

This requires a methodological pluralism that builds upon the strengths of various approaches. Therefore, we should stop getting lost in a battle centred around simple dichotomies such as quantitative versus qualitative approaches, indicator-based systems versus case studies, expert-based versus participatory assessments, outcome-orientation versus process-orientation. We must consider trade-offs and not miss the sound opportunities that various toolkits offer which have been prepared by scores of economists, sociologists and political scientists.

The desired common framework should not be confused with standard operating evaluation procedures established by individual donors that are universally applied without proper contextualization. It should rather be developed locally but applied by all donors operating in the country.

Such a common analytical framework needs to be supplemented by specific routines and modules that address the specific issues to be studied. A *tension and conflict impact assessment (TCIA)* may be an appropriate tool to understand conflict situations and to avoid unintended negative effects of aid.

Klingebiel et al. (GDI 1999) successfully tested an in-depth study approach in Tanzania. It comprised six main steps:

- description of the project region and the project,
- tension and conflict analysis with the aim to identify tensions and conflicts in the project region, their mechanisms and dynamics as well as the actors involved,
- tension-related identification of project stakeholders,
- sensitivity of the project to tensions and conflicts which is analysed by the interrelationship between the project and the local tensions,
- identification of impacts; this results from the first four steps, and
- conclusions and recommendations is the final step aiming at recognizing major impacts, describing their influence on the conflict of interest, and recommending ways and means how to deal with it.

This open approach applied by Klingebiel/GDI also allows for the stronger emphasis that Bush proposes to be crucial for future approaches. It favours local control, an organic process orientation, open-endedness, responsivity and calls for the sustained presence of those facilitating the refection process.

In linking up with the TCIA approach tested by Klingebiel/GDI in Tanzania, a first attempt of adapting the approach to the Sri Lankan context has been made by the Poverty Impact Monitoring Unit (PIMU) in cooperation with its partner organisation, the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA). PIMU, a GTZ supported project operating in Sri Lanka since about three years, aims at:

- *developing a* **conceptual approach and practical toolkit** towards impact monitoring in general and poverty related impact monitoring in particular,
- *translating its approach and toolkit into a* **service package** (applied research, consultancies, training as well as facilitation of dialogue and exchange) provided against fees to clients such as donor supported projects, NGO's or international organisations,
- **institutionalising** *the service package* of impact monitoring in a suitable manner within the Sri Lankan organisational landscape.

Since May 2001, PIMU operates as a support unit to its partner organisation CEPA, a newly established non-profit company that builds upon the PIMU experiences and carries forward its mandate as a service provider.

III.1   Basic principles

The practical experiences gained so far have led PIMU/CEPA to the formulation of the following basic principles:

- impact monitoring irrespective of its focus on poverty, gender, environment or conflict is a project function and shall be regarded as part of the management information system;
- it calls for a methodological pluralism built upon the specific strengths of various approaches;
- impact monitoring should involve all actors who cause or perceive impacts; it should respect the different views of stakeholders, promote the dialogue between them and stimulate learning processes;
- systematic internal impact monitoring shall be supplemented by external evaluations.

In aiming at the development of a coherent conceptual approach towards impact monitoring, PIMU/CEPA have identified three strategic perspectives:

The 'classical' **purpose related perspective** adapted in log-frame dominated projects is based on preconceived impact hypothesis starting from the project purpose and leading to overall goals. Typically, a selection of impacts to be monitored is made and indicators are formulated. Cause and effect relations are crucial and the project purpose is placed centre stage becoming the focal point of attention.

In contrast to that, a **context related perspective** examines the project environment in a more systemic manner. While stakeholders will have to identify fields of observation, a precise formulation of indicators is not of high importance. It is rather a context sensitivity and openness to look into the many unexpected impacts occurring parallel to implementation of a development intervention that characterize this perspective as valuable for planners and implementers.

Third, the **project transcending perspective** requires a critical dialogue of independent researchers, practitioners and policy makers. Based on the analysis of development trends in a particular geographical area, it invites practitioners to relate their interventions to the broader picture. Although the advantage of this perspective lies in a reduced bias in project impact assessment, there can be no guarantee that the attribution gap will be bridged.

From the stance of PIMU/CEPA, the challenge lies in respecting the different perspectives as equally relevant and valuable for the learning process of stakeholders as well as steering of interventions. It is therefore proposed to work with them in a complementary manner.

III.2   CEPA support to the Jaffna Rehabilitation Project

On the request of the GTZ-supported Jaffna Rehabilitation Project (JRP), CEPA had been invited to pay a one-week visit to Jaffna in May 2001 in order to first become familiar with the project concept, institutional set-up and practical implementation. Subsequently, the main objective of the assignment was to identify entry points for a systematic impact monitoring that would allow the project team to not only assess the potential sustainability of physical achievements (such as rehabilitated schools, drinking water supply systems and the construction of houses for internally displaced people) but also to understand the socio-political implications of project interventions.

After a review of major projects documents, a number of bilateral discussions with team members and field visits to some of the supported school development societies (SDS), water users associations (WUA) and housing clusters, a sensitisation workshop was conducted with the project team comprising of management and field workers, engineers and social organisers. The major results of the one-day workshop can be summarised as follows:

- In a brainstorming facilitated by CEPA, the JRP project team identifies a number of observed impacts that have never been incorporated neither in the basic concept paper nor in the log-frame of the JRP. Even more crucial, the questions of "Who benefits from most of the project interventions?" and "Does that lead to less or more tensions?" were felt by the team to be insufficiently addressed.

- The capacity of beneficiary groups (SDS, WUA, housing clusters) to be functional in accordance with the expectations of the group members can be regarded as the major condition for long lasting impact. Main criteria for functionality of beneficiary groups – as seen by the project team - are unity/strong leadership, clear awareness, regular meetings, active participation of all members, joint planning, proper implementation, transparency, joint monitoring and evaluation as well as good cooperation with external agencies.

- The development of a tool for the self-assessment of beneficiary group functionality requires joint development of criteria with the groups. This can be supported by competent facilitation of social organisers. However, while comparability of self-assessment results is in the interest of the project, a manipulation of beneficiary groups is to be avoided if the tool is meant to lead to maximum learning and ownership of the group.

- The JRP project team is of the opinion that – given the specific situation in the Jaffna peninsula with its twenty-year experience of civil war – the analysis of general project impacts must be complemented by a more particular conflict related impact assessment which is at least as important as any poverty related impact monitoring.

- While the Tension and Conflict Impact Matrix (TCIM) proposed by Klingebiel/GDI is a helpful starting point for reflecting observed or potential impacts of project interventions, the major challenge lies in defining the local dimensions of the main factors causing, triggering or aggravating tensions /conflicts.

- Finally, the proposal to not only differentiate intended and unintended as well as positive and negative impacts but also consider three different perspectives, namely the project team, the beneficiaries and the research team, subsequently leads to an undertaking that might stress capacities of ordinary development projects to the limit if not overburden them.

The preliminary experiences described above have meanwhile led to an In-Process-Consultancy (IPC) provided by CEPA to JRP. The IPC has a time-frame of one year and will comprise of several visits of CEPA professionals to Jaffna, conduct of self-assessments, preparation of case studies in selected beneficiary groups, development of a tailor-made tool for conflict impact assessment, regular backstopping to the project team and a final documentation of experiences made.

Acknowledging the limitations of the client (JRP) both in terms of time as well as budget, CEPA accepts the fact that the scope of work for the IPC will neither be able to look into all aspects that CEPA would regard as important nor guarantee a sufficient learning process that would lead to radical adjustments of the overall project concept.

III.3 Explanatory interpretation versus measurements

The preliminary CEPA experiences made in supporting the JRP seem to give a tentative response to the question of what type of information we might need in order to avoid doing harm with our development cooperation projects. Rather than quantitative measurements, we need explanatory information on impacts. We must understand the processes that have led to positive and negative, intended and unintended impacts. Moreover, we are well advised to respect the different perspectives expressed by different stakeholders.

Measurement based upon 'inductive' indicators that have been predefined by donor-driven planning workshops without clear reference to an impact model may be misleading. Linear impact models such as the standard type of "log-frame" with its vertical logic will not be sufficient as they do are not sensitive to the observation of negative as well as positive unintentional impacts. The log-frame approach sidelines them and puts them into the dustbin of 'assumptions'.

On the way towards flexible and open initiatives for impact monitoring, crosscutting issues such as poverty, gender, environment *and* conflict require further development and testing of methodologies. While impact monitoring can be seen as a task that needs a strong bottom-up perspective leading to participatory indicator development, some of the basic questions regarding PCIA can be answered as follows:

Why do we need impact assessment that is sensitive to tensions/conflicts?
To lead to a better understanding of the conflict situation and its dynamics; to stimulate learning; to steer the project; to orient work towards impact;

What needs to be studied?
Development and peacebuilding impacts and their dynamic interactions, in particular unintentional impacts;

Who should be involved?
Project staff, beneficiaries; target population; important stakeholders outside the project;

Where should it be applied?
At all levels that are deemed important to the stakeholders;

When should it be performed?
PCIA: during programming of aid (ex ante macro-level); project planning (ex ante micro level); impact monitoring (observing a set of indicators assessing conflict risks and tensions), and evaluation (ex-post micro- and macro-level)

How should it be tooled?
Aiming at local ownership and participatory; avoiding linear cause-effect thinking such as the log-frame mindset;