Human Face to Data as a Contemporary Approach to Decision Making in the Development Sector

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INTRODUCTION

The need to ensure transparency and accountability of development aid has become a global topic of discussion. There is a growing body of literature that looks into the effectiveness and impact of development aid and identifies that many development projects current and past have not met their stated goals (Cronin & Regan, 2002; Wenar, 2006; Leve, 2007; Panday, 2009; Williamson, 2009; Eneh, 2011). In response to such critique, development projects more than ever are faced with the need to incorporate effective, meaningful, and innovative monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure progress is tracked throughout the program cycle (Bamberger, Rao & Woolcock, 2010). On the other hand, it is important to consider that despite having these mechanisms in place, the reliability of the data can still be questioned (Quibria and Islam, 2015). This book chapter offers evidence from a development project in the global south that effectively managed and applied data to inform decision making and therefore enhancing its chances to achieve its goals.

Bangladesh, a South Asian country, joined the global cohort of lower-middle-income countries in 2018 (World Bank, 2019). The country has recorded robust economic growth in recent years, which reached a new peak with about 8.1 percent GDP growth rate in 2018 (Centre for Policy Dialogue, 2019). Since its liberation in 1971, foreign aid has remained crucial to the socio-economic development of this country. Bangladesh received about US$132,060.6 million of foreign aid (Economic Relations Division, 2019) up to 2017. In 2018, foreign aid accounted for about 16 percent of the national revenue of Bangladesh (Chattopadhyay, 2018). In the 2017-18 fiscal year, the third-highest amount of the external grant (excluding loan) came from the United States and was worth US$2,796 million (Economic Relations Division, 2019).

Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities (SHOUHARDO) is a food security program funded by the United States government and the Government of Bangladesh (CARE Bangladesh, 2019a). The program is implemented by an international non-governmental organization, CARE Bangladesh, in eight northern districts of Bangladesh that fall under char (riverine islands) and haor (natural depression) regions (Ibid). Both char and haor are prone to natural disasters, and people suffer from multiple vulnerabilities caused by seasonal flash floods, river, and wave erosion that affect

their agriculture, fisheries, livestock, and wage labor livelihoods. The program interventions are geared at addressing livelihood challenges, namely- food insecurity, malnutrition, inadequate public service provision, gender inequality, and disaster-related vulnerabilities for 384,000 ultra-poor people (Ibid).

To achieve its goal, SHOUHARDO III has put significant efforts into ensuring a robust monitoring mechanism (CARE Bangladesh, 2019b). One of the refinement approaches that the program has been using to monitor its results is a longitudinal study. The longitudinal study was designed to track progress on several indicators in 680 randomly selected households that were surveyed every six months. Drawing inference from the quantitative longitudinal study findings was difficult for the program management as some of the trends and changes in some variables were inexplicable; therefore, the program commissioned separate qualitative research to deconstruct and interpret findings from the longitudinal study. The program applied an inductive ethnography to interpret quantitative results by confronting these with data obtained from the qualitative research. The application of this research findings helped the program to make adjustments in the design and implementation.

This chapter begins with the background and methodology for initiating an inductive ethnography and poses descriptive narrative on the findings, and finally, argues that research of this kind can be of significant value if the findings are taken into account while making decisions in the development program. It also delves into implications of this research for program management and puts forth the case of similar research at large scale.

BACKGROUND

Many development projects present their results mostly in the forms of numbers, figures, and graphs. Bamberger, Rao & Woolcock (2010) criticized reporting numbers only as of the result of development projects and referred to this as a partial-approach. One of the ways to go beyond this critique is to conduct rigorous evaluation; however, assessment of that kind usually takes place at the end of a project (Ibid). More recent attention has focused on the provision of mixed-method monitoring as a good practice as it provides real-time feedback and allows the space for development programs to review and adjust project design while it is ongoing (Cronin & Regan, 2002; Ibid).

One of the approaches promoted by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Technical Assistance to NGOs (TANGO) is known as 'Recurrent Monitoring Survey (RMS)' which is characterized by real-time and high-frequency panel data collection, and small sample size (Frankenberger, Smith & Griffin, 2017). SHOUHARDO III has been conducting a hybrid RMS called, 'Fostering Learning and Adaptation in Resilience Building (FLAIRb) since July 2017. FLAIRb is designed to track the interplay between the program interventions and household level results; identify activities that are making limited progress and troubleshoot at the household level what the gaps are for appropriate program activities; and, determine resilience progress and identify the areas of refinement in implementation.

After four rounds of the survey, the program sought to review its outcomes at the program and individual household level. The program realized that FLAIRb findings spotted gap areas and progress that can be taken for scaling up within the program and beyond. The quantitative data pieces from FLAIRb were useful, but it did not offer the depth in understanding of the contextual factors and changes at the household level. To address this particular gap, the program conducted small-scale qualitative research, which is the basis of this chapter.

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