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Methodological Critique and Indicator Systems

Development activities need on the one hand visions rooted in the values of the actors concerned, visions that provide orientation for the respective strategies and actions. On the other hand there is a need for appropriate methods and instruments to concretely plan those strategies and activities, monitor them, and evaluate and assess their impacts.

There now exist almost more of these methods and toolboxes than one could count – designed, tried-out and published by the various stakeholders of development cooperation (donor organisations, partners in the South, method specialists, research institutions etc.). It is interesting to note that, historically speaking, attention was first focused on planning methods, partially also due to the fact that the increasingly common practice of evaluations was revealing time and time again that, without a clear definition of objectives and corresponding planning, evaluations of the traditional kind at least (such as comparing actual achievements with objectives) lacked any clear basis.

The classic example of (project) planning methods to be mentioned here is the Logical Framework Approach (LFA), which GTZ and Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation then used as a precursor to their "ZOPP" (objectives-oriented project planning) method, developed in the 1980s. This methodology displays inter alia the following underlying features:

- unilinear causal logic
- planability of the future
- process-orientation
- analytic deconstruction as opposed to synthetic construction
- problems as a central point of departure for the analysis

When the methodology is applied, the following characteristics become evident:

- separation of the person from the issue
- separation of reason and feeling
- writing instead of discussing as the key element of discourse.

It is not possible here to trace all aspects of the boom in methodological development which has taken place in recent years. Practical experience and methodological critique led developers for instance to attempt to turn the "linear" ZOPP into a more "cyclic" instrument, which produced PCM (Project Cycle Management), an instrument incorporating the additional elements of monitoring, evaluation and in-process planning. Others have sought for instance to utilise elements of networked thinking, or to evaluate the dynamics of different factors impacting on various life circumstances, or to place greater emphasis on participatory methods, e.g. to analyse the socio-economic living conditions of population groups, one example of the latter being the PRA (Participatory Rapid Appraisal).

These attempts to develop and refine methodologies deserve acknowledgement (particularly since they seek to take greater account of more complex inter-relationships). Nevertheless, the refinement or multiplication of methods alone will not provide the key answers to the question of how social change can be "properly" planned or influenced, or how an organisation's input to that process can be evaluated. Methods are always and necessarily an attempt to reduce the complexity of social reality, and their application always implies a limitation on the perception and perceptibility of social relationships and contexts. This is not to say that we are "anti-method", but we would like to emphasise that the use of methods is only warranted in the knowledge of their limitations. The actors developing and/or applying these methods must also be motivated to seek a joint, "intercultural" understanding of what is happening in development cooperation.

To provide one example of a critical, though not "negative" attitude to methods, the issue of "indicators" will now be dealt with briefly. Against the background of the fundamental difficulty of measuring the "impacts" of development projects, the use of "indicators" is being recommended everywhere. It is indeed appropriate to seek verifiable indicators – especially those which the target group have selected themselves – though here too it should be remembered: As the term suggests, indicators indicate something, but are not themselves identical to the changes they indicate. Although there is an increasing trend towards "process indicators", i.e. indicators which include qualitative observations made by stakeholders as opposed to merely quantifiable data, here too the basic principle applies: Indicators remain one methodological element amongst several possible and necessary elements, and even the most sophisticated system of indicators will fall far short of capturing fully the complex life reality which it purports to represent. Too much sophistication is rather an indicator of the fact that more importance is being attached to methods than to the actual changes themselves.