Impact Assessment: An Overview.

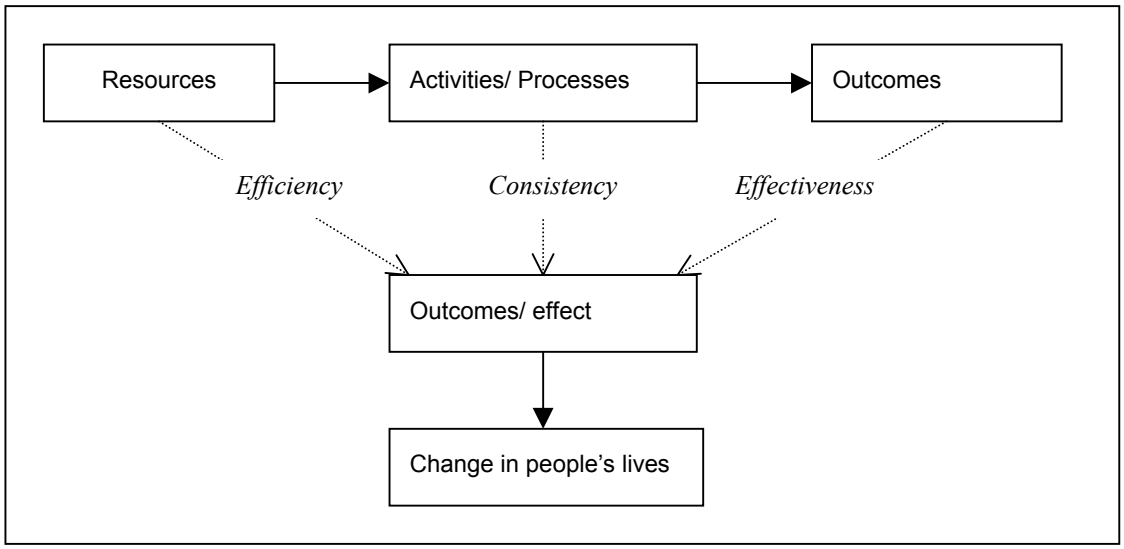
Impact assessment is a broad field. The impact of the full range of development interventions can be assessed (projects, programmes, sector wide support and donor country strategies and macro economic growth and programme aid support) using qualitative or quantitative approaches or a mix. The objectives of the impact assessment exercise may differ, as may the intended end user of the information. This summary provides a simple overview of key issues and approaches.

Defining Impact.

Forms of impact assessment (IA) vary. IA can focus on whether a policy or intervention has succeeded in terms of its original objectives, or it may be a wider assessment of overall changes caused by the policy or intervention – positive and negative, intended or unintended (Roche, 1999:21).

In order to conduct an effective impact assessment one must first be clear about what one considers to be an impact. Roche defines impact as *'the systematic analysis of the lasting or significant changes - positive or negative, intended or not – in people's lives brought about by a given action or series of actions.'* (1999:21). It can be useful to distinguish between the *impacts* of an intervention and its *outcomes*. For example outcome or effect of a legal rights project might be increased use of the legal system to claim a right whereas its impact might be the change in an individual's quality of life (Roche, 1999:22).

Fig 1: Distinguishing between efficiency, effectiveness, consistency and impact.



Source: Roche, 1999: 23, adapted from Willot, 1985.

Impact assessments might also wish to examine the efficiency, effectiveness, consistency or impact of an intervention (Roche, 1999:22).

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Table 1: Efficiency, effectiveness, consistency and impact.

Focus of impact assessment	Purpose
Efficiency	◆ Relates inputs to outputs ◆ Could the same results have been achieved more cheaply? ◆ Would a few more resources achieved much better results?
Effectiveness	◆ To what extent has the intervention achieved its objectives?
Consistency	◆ Were intervention methods/ approaches consistent with the outcomes achieved? E.g. using non-participatory project design and implementation would not be consistent with empowerment objectives
Impact	◆ To what extent has the intervention changed the lives of the intended beneficiaries?

Source: Roche, 1999:22

Impact assessment may be on-going in the form of *monitoring*, may be occasional, in the form of *mid-term reviews*, or may be ex-post, in the form of *ex-post impact assessments or evaluations*. Monitoring reports and mid-term reviews may be used to inform the implementing agent (government, NGOs or donors) project staff whether the project should continue unchanged, whether it should be adapted, scaled up, scaled down or mainstreamed through out the country. Ex-post evaluations are often used to learn lessons for the future and to judge whether the intervention is suitable for replication.

Changes in approach.

Approaches of impact assessment have changed over time as the dominant development paradigm has evolved from modernism to social development and empowerment. Methods have moved from being almost entirely quantitative to containing a mix of quantitative and qualitative, and have followed developments in environmental impact assessment (EIA), social cost benefit analysis (SCBA), logical framework analysis (LFA), social auditing and participative methods.

What information is wanted?

The type of information wanted by impact assessors will depend very much on the objectives of the impact assessment and the end users of the information. These factors will guide the choice of impact indicator, the selection of research method and the forms of data analysis and presentation/ dissemination used.

Impact assessment can be based on quantitative or qualitative information using a range of indicators. **Indicators** and **methods** are discussed in more detail below.

Impact assessment is part of the policy or project cycle. During the planning stage of policies/ interventions objectives are set and indicators of success formulated. Impact assessment can generate information on these indicators to assess on-going interventions/ policies. It can also be part of an ex post evaluation and impact assessment. This can feed into the planning of new interventions and policies.

Where impact assessment is taken seriously information on the selected indicators will have been collected as part of a **pre-intervention baseline**[1], and then regularly during the life of the intervention, for *primary stakeholders* (project beneficiaries) and possibly a control group[2] to assess the counterfactual (what would have happened without the intervention).

The **end user** of an impact assessment will influence how the process is designed and implemented and how the resulting information is disseminated - whether it is a national macro-economic policy which is being assessed or a micro-project providing sexual health information to remote rural women.

Key questions are:
- Who are the stakeholders?
- What power or influence in the process do stakeholders have?
- How will decisions made following the impact assessment change different stakeholders' lives?

Equally important are **the objectives of the impact assessment**. Impact assessment can have two key objectives: **'proving'** the impact of the intervention (the accountability agenda) or **'improving'** practice (the lesson learning agenda) (Herbert and Shepherd, 2001). Impact assessment exercises may be geared towards providing information for upward accountability (i.e. from Districts to Central Government, from implementing agents to MDAs, from GoG to development partners), for lesson learning (for the project designers or implementing agency) or for downward accountability (to project beneficiaries/ primary stakeholders).

Impact assessment for lesson learning.

This suggests that the funders and managers of an intervention acknowledge and 'embrace error' (ibid). However, this second type of impact assessment requires a high degree of transparency and trust (Montgomery et al, 1996 in Herbert and Shepherd, 2001) as those who are closely involved in an intervention may become vulnerable to having weaknesses and failures used against them.

Impact assessment for upward accountability.

This implies that critical judgement and may be perceived as threatening to the future of the intervention. As a result it is likely to encourage people closely involved in the management of the intervention to over-emphasise its success (Herbert and Shepherd, 2001).

Impact assessment for downward accountability

This aims to deliver accountability to the primary stakeholders/ beneficiaries or 'the poor'. Development agencies have placed little emphasis on this type of impact assessment, as they have been under greater pressure to deliver upward accountability. As a result primary stakeholders[3] have often seen evaluations as 'top-down' and bureaucratic (Roche, 1999:29). They have commonly been designed to meet the information needs of donors or government officials, and it can be difficult to meet these needs and those of other stakeholders simultaneously. However, there have been some recent attempts to develop participatory

[1] The methodology exists for the reconstruction of baseline data where baseline studies were not conducted at the start of the intervention (Herbert and Shepherd, 2001).

[2] Roche highlights the ethical and methodological problems inherent in using control groups, as there is unlikely to be a group of people 'subject to exactly the same influences, except for the specific agency input, and whose situation mirrors that of the beneficiary group over the life of a given project' (Roche, 1999:33), and withholding support from a 'control group' may contravene their human rights (ibid).

[3] i.e. the poor/ intended project beneficiaries

modes of impact assessment aimed at poverty reduction (e.g. see recent ActionAid/ DFID research) (Herbert and Shepherd, 2001). Whether an impact assessment aims to 'prove' or 'improve' impact, and whether the information is for upward or downward accountability has implications for the approach used.

See Table 2, which highlights the approaches associated with 'proving' or 'improving' impact, and Table 3, which comments on the compatibility of these approaches to the goals of upward, accountability, downward accountability and lesson learning.

Table 2: The Goals of Impact Assessment.

	Proving impact	**Improving practice**
Primary Goal	Measuring as accurately as possible the impacts of the interventions	Understanding the processes of the intervention and their impacts so as to improve those processes
Main Audiences	Academics Policy makers MDAs Evaluation Departments Programme Managers/ Implementing agents	Programme Managers/ Implementing Agents Donor field staff NGO personnel Intended beneficiaries
Associated Approaches/ Factors	Objectivity Theory External Top down Generalisation Academic research Long timescales Degree of confidence	Subjectivity Practice Internal Bottom up Contextualisation Market Research Short timescales Level of plausibility

After Herbert and Shepherd 2001, adapted from Hulme, 1997.

Table 3: Compatibility of different approaches to goals of impact assessment

Approaches	Lesson Learning	Upward Accountability	Downward Accountability
Internal assessment	Compatible but there may be questions around the ability of internal staff to stand back and take an 'objective' view	Results may be seen as being distorted by interests of programme/ project staff to emphasise achievements	Compatible as is likely to provide feedback required.
External assessment	May be regarded by programme/ project staff as inappropriate	Compatible. Likely to be familiar with agency's needs and priorities. Also likely to present findings in a format acceptable to higher level authorities	Incompatible since likely to be 'removed' from the local context and the needs and priorities of lower level staff.
Bottom up	More likely to get lessons agreed and accepted	Potential tensions between demands for data at different levels of aggregation	Compatible. Allows for local level monitoring and evaluation
Top down	Difficult to get lessons agreed, understood and accepted by primary stakeholders and lower level staff	Compatible	Incompatible
Interpretative	More challenging to distil lessons but the diversity of views more likely to be reflected	Can be difficult to provide standardised data and generalisations to those with little knowledge of the intervention. Uniform data needed by agency unlikely to emerge from interpretative approaches alone	Compatible.
Objective	Ideally central to lesson learning. In practice may result in the use of methods which do not reflect the diversity of stakeholders' priorities	Able to provide standardised data and generalisations.	Incompatible
High frequency	Compatible particularly for process projects and those requiring regular review	? Enhances accountability. May lead to too much data too often	Accountability enhanced? Frequent data collection - heavy time (and other) costs.
Low frequency	Learning process may be constrained if reflection on impact is not regular	Compatible - able to provide feedback at key moments in the programme/project cycle	Advantage of being less 'taxing' on beneficiaries and low level staff.

Source: Herbert and Shepherd, 2001.

Indicators of impact.

Traditionally poverty oriented impact assessments focused on economic indicators, such as income, levels and patterns of expenditure and consumption and assets (Herbert and Shepherd, 2001). However, in the 1980s, with an increasing understanding of the multidimensional nature of poverty use of social indicators such as educational and health status and nutritional levels increased (ibid). During the 1990s, indicators have been devised which attempt to capture socio-political factors - for example, the measurement of individual control over resources, involvement in and access to household and wider decision making structures, social networks and electoral participation (ibid). This makes impact assessment more sophisticated but they add to the complexity of the work. Those involved in impact assessment now need a broader portfolio of skills, including those of social analysis (Hulme, 1997 in Herbert and Shepherd).

MDAs in Ghana are currently working on identifying a range of indicators appropriate for both monitoring and impact assessment. It is intended that this document should support that process.

Selecting a unit of analysis.

Should analysis take place at the level of the individual, household, community, organisation or a combination of these? Different aspects of poverty and deprivation are evident at different levels of social organisation. For example, the lack of street-lighting or access to markets may apply predominantly at the level of the settlement or community while food security and income may apply to the household level, or even at an intra-household level due to differentiation based on age, gender or relationship to household head (Herbert and Shepherd, 2002).

Our focus on a particular level of analysis may lead to important gaps in understanding. Assessment or analysis at different levels would also allow any inter-linkages between them to be explored (ibid). Table 4 (below) highlights the advantages and disadvantages of different units of assessment.

Gosling and Edwards (1995) have a useful section in their book on recognising and dealing with discrimination and difference, which for example suggests ways of working with children, women and minority ethnic groups (see Selected Resources).

Table 4: Advantages and disadvantages of different units of Assessment

Unit of Assessment	Advantages	Disadvantages
Individual	• Easily defined and identified • Allows social relations to be explored • Allows inter-household relations to be explored • Can allow more personal and intimate issues to emerge • Permits an exploration of how different people by virtue of their gender, age, social status etc. experience poverty/ the effects of the intervention. • Permits understanding of political capital	• Most interventions have impacts beyond the individual level • Difficulty of attribution through long impact chain • Difficult to aggregate findings
Household	• Relatively easily identified and defined • Permits appreciation of household coping and survival strategies such as income, asset, consumption and labour pooling • Permits appreciation of link between individual, household and group/community • Permits understanding of links between household life cycle and well-being.	• Exact membership sometimes difficult to assess • The assumption that what is good for the household is good for all its members is often flawed.
Group/ CBO	• Permits understanding of collective action and social capital • Permits an understanding of political capital • Permits understanding of potential sustainability of impacts • Permits understanding of potential community level transformation	• Exact membership sometimes difficult to assess • Group dynamics often difficult to unravel and understand • Difficult to compare using quantitative data
Community/ Village	• Permits understanding of differences within the community • Permits understanding of community level poverty and of changes in provision and access to produced capital such as water, electricity. • Permits understanding of collective action and social capital • Permits an understanding of political capital • Permits understanding of relations between different groups/factions in the community eg. clans. • Permits understanding of potential community level transformation and beyond • Can act as a sampling frame for individual/household assessments	• Exact boundary sometimes difficult to assess • Within community dynamics often difficult to understand • Difficult to compare
Local NGO/ Development Agency	• Permits understanding of potential sustainability of impacts • Permits understanding of changes brought about by capacity building • Allows performance especially of effectiveness and efficiency to be assessed • Allows relationship with community, group and individual changes to be explored.	• Within NGO dynamics often difficult to understand • Difficult to compare across local NGOs
Institutions	• Permits broader change and influence to be assessed	• Greater problems of attribution • Internal dynamics and processes difficult to explore or understand

Source: Herbert and Shepherd, 2001, adapted from Hulme, 1997 and Roche, 1999.

Methods of impact assessment.

Introduction.

In this section we focus on methods for project level impact assessment, although the impact of donor funded sector wide approaches and macro-level changes in government policy can also be assessed. See Herbert and Shepherd 2001 for methods appropriate to macro-level assessments (See Selected Resources).

Most successful impact assessments need to explore the whole 'impact chain', and so investigate the link between inputs and activities, how these generate outputs and these in turn outcomes and finally impact (Roche, 1999:26).

The Methods.

Impact assessments at the project level have moved increasingly from single method to multi-method approaches (Herbert and Shepherd, 2001), and greater use of participatory approaches in impact assessment has expanded the toolbox (Hulme, 1997 in Herbert and Shepherd, 2001). Although sample surveys are still common, they are now often combined with participatory and other qualitative approaches, and qualitative methods (rapid appraisal, participant observation, PLA) are often used on their own, particularly for NGO implemented projects (Herbert and Shepherd, 2001).

As each key method has its own strengths and weaknesses (see table below) they are increasingly selected for use together. As a result studies are now able to benefit from the advantages of sample surveys and statistical methods (quantification, representativeness and attribution) and the advantages of the qualitative and participatory approaches (ability to uncover approaches, capture the diversity of opinions and perceptions, unexpected impacts etc.) (Herbert and Shepherd, 2001).

Which method(s) to choose will depend on the nature of the project, the type of information which is needed (or given priority), the context of the study and the availability of resources (time, money, human) (ibid).

Table 5: Common Impact Assessment Methods

Method	Key Features
Sample Surveys	Collect quantitative data through questionnaires. Usually a random sample and a matched control group are used to measure pre-determined indicators before and after the intervention
Rapid Appraisal	A range of tools and techniques developed originally as rapid rural appraisal (RRA). Involves the use of focus groups, semi-structured interviews with key informants, case studies, participant observation and secondary sources
Participant Observation	Extended residence in a programme/project community by field researchers using qualitative techniques and mini-scale sample surveys
Case Studies	Detailed studies of a specific unit (a group, locality, organisation) involving open-ended questioning and the preparation of 'histories'.
Participatory Learning and Action	The preparation by beneficiaries of a programme of timelines, impact flow charts, village and resource maps, well being and wealth ranking, seasonal diagrams, problem ranking and institutional assessments through group processes assisted by a facilitator.
Specialised methods	E.g. Photographic records and video.

Source: Herbert and Shepherd, 2001, adapted from Hulme (1997) and Montgomery et al (1996)

How to choose which methods or mix of methods to use?

Herbert and Shepherd (2001) suggest that before embarking on an impact assessment study, the researchers ask themselves the following questions:

- What are the objectives of the impact assessment? – 'Proving'/ 'Improving'?
- How complex is the project, what type is it (blue print or process), what is already known about it?
- What information is needed?
- When is the information needed?
- How is the information to be used and by whom?
- What level of reliability is required?
- What resources are available (time, money and human)?
- Who is the audience of the impact assessment study?

Quantitative research methods can be used to collect data which can be analysed in numerical form. They pose the questions *who, what, when, where, how much, how many, how often?* Things are either counted or measured or a set questionnaire is used. Answers can be coded and statistical analysis used to give responses in the form of averages, ratios, ranges etc (Gosling and Edwards, 1995). See Gosling and Edwards for an introduction to using surveys. *Qualitative research methods* provide greater flexibility and pose questions in a more open-ended manner. This can make analysis and synthesis more difficult.

Specific suggestions on impact assessments of advocacy interventions, assessments of organisations, and in conflict situations can be found in Roche, 1999. Gosling and Edwards, 1995 have useful sections on assessment in conflict/ emergency situations (See Selected Resources).

See Table 6 (below) for guidance on the strengths and weaknesses of key impact assessment methods, and Table 7 (further below) for when key methods are appropriate.

Table 6: Strengths and weaknesses of key impact assessment methods.

Method Criteria	Surveys	Rapid Appraisal	Participant Observation	Case Studies	Participatory Learning and Action
Coverage (scale of applicability)	High	Medium	Low	Low	Medium
Representativeness	High	Medium	Low	Low	Medium
Ease of data standardisation, aggregation and synthesis	High	Medium	Medium to Low	Low	Medium to Low
Ability to isolate and measure non-intervention causes of change	High	Low	Low	Low	Low
Ability to cope with the problem of attribution	High	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
Ability to capture qualitative information about poverty reduction	Low	High	High	High	High
Ability to capture causal processes of poverty and vulnerability	Low	High	High	Medium	High
Ability to capture diversity of perceptions about poverty	Low	High	High	Medium	High
Ability to elicit views of women, minorities and other disadvantaged groups about poverty	Low	Medium??	High	High - if targeted	Medium??
Ability to capture unexpected negative impacts on 'the poor'	Low	High	Very High	High	High
Ability to identify and articulate felt needs	Low	High	High	Medium to Low	High
Degree of participation of 'the poor' encouraged by the method	Low	High	Medium	Medium	Very High
Potential to contribute to building capacity of stakeholders with respect to poverty analysis	Low	High	Low	Medium to Low	Very High
Probability of enhancing downwards accountability to poor groups and communities	Low	High	Medium	Medium	High
Ability to capture the multidimensionality of poverty	Low	Medium	High	Medium	Very High
Ability to capture poverty impact at different levels e.g. individual, household, community	Low	Medium	High	Low	High
Human resource requirements	Specialist supervision, large numbers of less qualified field workers	High skilled practitioners who are able to analyse and write up results	Mid-skilled practitioners. Long time commitment. Need good supervision	Mid-skilled practitioners. Need good supervision	High skilled practitioners
Cost range	Very high to Medium	High to Medium	Medium to Low	Medium to Low	High to Medium
Timescale	Very high to Medium	Medium to Low	High	High to Medium	Medium to Low[4]

Source: Herbert and Shepherd, 2002, adapted and extended from Montgomery 1996 and Hulme, 1997.

[4] It is important to note that participatory methods could consume a lot of poor people's time.

Table 7: When are key impact assessment methods appropriate?

Sample Surveys are appropriate when:	**Rapid Appraisal and/or PLA are appropriate when:**	**Participant Observation and /or Case Studies are appropriate when:**
The intervention affects large numbers Accurate estimates of impact are required Statistical comparisons must be made between groups over time and/or between locations Delivery/implementation mechanisms are operating well, thereby justifying investment in the assessment of impacts The target population is heterogeneous and it is difficult to isolate the factors unrelated to the intervention	The intervention is promoting participatory principles in (re)-planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation An understanding of motivations and perceptions is a priority One of the purposes of the study is to assess whether or not felt needs are being addressed by the intervention The impact of community-based organisations or other institution building activities are of importance There is a need to understand the quality of the data collected through surveys There is a need for contextual studies before designing more complex monitoring or impact assessment exercises (eg. case studies or surveys)	An understanding of motivations and perceptions is a priority Other methods are unlikely to capture the views of women, minorities and other disadvantaged groups One of the purposes of the study is to assess whether or not felt needs are being addressed by the intervention The impact of community-based organisations or other institution building activities are of importance There is a need to understand the quality of the data collected through surveys or rapid appraisals (e.g causal processes of poverty) There is a need for contextual studies before designing more complex monitoring or impact assessment exercises (e.g. before carrying out rapid appraisals or before designing a survey)
Sample Surveys are usually not appropriate when:	**Rapid Appraisal and/or PLA are not usually appropriate when:**	**Participant Observation and/or Case Studies are usually not appropriate when:**
An intervention affects a small number of people Policymakers are mainly concerned about the outcomes of the intervention e.g. how many people use the health clinic? Implementation is recent and untested and it is likely that the way in which the intervention is implemented will have little impact in the present time The purpose of the assessment is to study complex activities or processes (e.g. the development and operation of community based organisations in poor communities) The purpose of the assessment is to document easily observable changes in the physical environment or other tangibles The purpose of the assessment is to understand whether or not the intervention is meeting the felt needs of the beneficiaries	Interventions are relatively un-complex, in which bounded locations are not units of analyses (e.g. health centres serving a wide catchment area) Indicators of impact are uncontroversial and negative impacts are unlikely Standardised and statistically representative generalisations for large and diverse populations are regarded as the sole priority Participation of beneficiaries is not a priority	The intervention is small and 'uncomplicated' providing a specific service or limited intervention which is unlikely to affect community dynamics beyond a few specific effects (e.g. diseases specific health facilities or campaigns) Bounded locations are not units of analysis Indicators of impact are clear and easily measurable or assessable (by survey or rapid appraisals) Indicators of impact are uncontroversial and negative impacts are unlikely Information is needed quickly, and standardised, statistical representative generalisations are regarded as the sole priority

Source: Herbert and Shepherd, 2001.

Triangulating findings.

MDAs in Ghana will want to be assured that the findings from impact assessments are robust. Confidence in IA findings can be increased through triangulation, in other words using information from a number of different sources as part of the impact assessment process. This may mean that individually commissioned IA studies include a range of methods geared to capturing the voices of a range of stakeholders (both 'winners' and 'losers' from a given intervention at the community level through to the macro or national level), AND that the findings of these individually commissioned studies are set against findings from national level surveys conducted by GSS and PRAs.

Avoiding Bias.

Bias can be introduced by the type of questions researchers ask and who they talk to, and when interviews or surveys are conducted Gosling and Edwards (1995). The way that questions are asked, the behaviour of interviewers and their gender or background (etc.) can influence responses. In addition, the way that data is analysed or presented can introduce bias (Gosling and Edwards, 1995:39-41). Ways to minimise bias include the careful training of researchers, setting of objectives and indicators, and the triangulation of information.

It is important to remember that impacts considered significant will differ by gender, class and other dimensions of social difference, in addition to being influenced by their role in the project or programme. Aggregating these views into an 'objective truth' may be impossible.

In addition, where donors or other 'outsiders' specify the selection of impact assessment indicators or the use of specific methods of data collection or analysis important unanticipated benefits or changes may be missed, or the intervention may be identified as having a narrower impact than it did in reality.

For example, it is common for microfinance institutions (MFIs) to measure impact by assessing outreach (the number of loans disbursed) sometimes disaggregated by gender, socio-economic group, location and sub-sector (of the enterprise), by changes in employment and income or turnover at the enterprise level. However, it is less common for MFIs to assess impact by looking at changes in less tangible indicators to do with household well-being. Microfinance may be invested in consumption smoothing and micro-enterprises which form only part of complex livelihood strategies. Enterprise turnover and employment levels may not increase but the enterprise may become more secure as a result of higher levels of working capital, alternatively debt may increase vulnerability, and result in the drawing down of household assets. In order to capture such changes at the household level indicators must be developed which have local relevance, such as changes in school enrolment or retention for girls, improvements or declines in food security or in the quality of housing stock. These can be quantified and are useful proxies for assessing the real outcomes of accessing financial services (Bird & Ryan, 1998, Bird, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, Bird et al 2002[5]).

[5] Bird, K., and Ryan, P. (1998) *'An Evaluation of DFID Support to the Kenya Enterprise Programme's Juhudi Credit Scheme.'* December 1998. Evaluation Study. DFID. EV605.

Bird, K. (1999) *'The Constraints facing small and micro entrepreneurs.'* Mimeo, International Development Department, Birmingham University, Birmingham.

Bird, K (2000a) '*Urban Poverty and the Uses of Micro-Finance',* in Zambia Country Study: Evaluation of DFID Support to Poverty Reduction. Mimeo, DFID EvD, 2000.

Bird, K. (2000b) '*Project Urban Self-Help: From Relief to Empowerment?'* in Zambia Country Study: Evaluation of DFID Support to Poverty Reduction. Mimeo, DFID EvD, 2000.

Bird, K., et al (2002) 'Evaluation of RDDP I and II Credit Schemes: The Rakai Rural Credit Scheme (RRCS) and The Danish Women's Credit Scheme (DWCS).' Danida Evaluation Department.

Attribution.

The issue of attribution or causality is at the centre of debates about impact assessment. It is important to recognise that interventions occur in a socio-cultural and economic context. They cannot easily be isolated from the impacts of other organisations, from government policy, from shifts in the global economy or national political economy. One can estimate the plausibility of *x* input generating *y* impact, but '(o)ften the most that can be done is to demonstrate through reasoned argument that a given input leads logically towards a given change, even if this cannot be proved statistically (Roche, 1999:33).

Determining the causality of change can be problematic. In addition, the nature of change is contextually specific and may be path dependent. It is contingent or dependent on specific events, conditions or on the context of a given situation *as well as* the intervention (Herbert & Shepherd, 2001). So, an intervention which creates a certain impact may not do so in a different setting at a different time. Moreover, those involved in impact assessment should be conscious of the need to map the counterfactual i.e. what would have happened without the intervention. But in doing so they ought to be aware that change is not always linear, and can be unpredictable, sudden and discontinuous (Uphoff, 1993, Roche, 1994 and Fowler, 1995 in Roche, 1999:25).

Table 8 (below) outlines how the three main paradigms of impact assessment: the scientific method; the humanities tradition and the participatory learning and action approach[6] attempt to address the problem of attribution. There are strengths and weaknesses in the way each of these approaches attempts to deal with attribution. But, in practice, approaches tend to be combined (particularly scientific and humanities approaches) and this makes for more robust design (Herbert and Shepherd, 2001).

[6] This classification is borrowed from Hulme, 1997.

Table 8: Dealing with the problem of attribution

Description of method	How attribution is addressed	Comments
The 'scientific' method		
Derives from natural sciences Quantitative in orientation - depends on surveys and statistical analysis .	Seeks to ensure that effects can be attributed to causes through 'experimentation'. Two main approaches: a) Seeks to compare *'with and 'without'* scenarios - commonly used in assessing impact of macroeconomic reforms and adjustment on the poor b) Use of control groups - a *'before and after'* comparison of a group involved in the intervention and an identical group that was not involved (the control). Used widely in project assessments	Difficult to identify and sample rigorously a matched 'control population.' So complex statistical procedures are often used to adjust for differences in groups. This adds to the complexity, time and expertise needed. Difficulties in overcoming 'reverse causality' - impact affecting intervention. Withholding support to a control group in order for it to remain 'uncontaminated' may be unethical in some situations e.g. in emergency situations.
The humanities tradition		
Roots in humanities Inductive approach with a focus on key informants, recording using notes or images. Analyst usually directly involved in data collection	Aim: to interpret processes involved in the intervention and to judge which impacts have a high level of plausibility. Recognises that there are usually different and sometimes conflicting accounts of what has happened and what has been achieved by the intervention. Causality is inferred from the information about the causal change collected from beneficiaries and key informants and by triangulation with data from secondary sources in/ out of the project/ programme area.	Studies using this approach tend to have considerable difficulties with respect to the attribution of cause and effect - cannot usually demonstrate the causal link. May not provide as robust conclusions as the *fully resourced* scientific method, may have greater validity than superficial 'scientific' studies.

Table 8 (continued).

Description of method	How attribution is addressed	Comments
Participatory Approaches		
Based on a range of tools and methods which allows key stakeholders (including beneficiaries) to influence the assessment. This approach is still in its infancy. Increasingly used by NGOs e.g. Proshika in Bangladesh have begun using PLA methods extensively for their assessment and planning exercises. Recent research by Goyder et al on PLA also takes the debate and methodology forward.	No significant attention paid to attribution. Literature only partially addresses the issue. Subjective perceptions of causality are especially useful in understanding the motivations, incentives and perceived situations of poor people, and designing programmes which fit with those perceptions and are therefore more likely to work.	From the scientific perspective, PLA has grave problems with attribution. This arises out of the subjectivity of its conceptualisations of impact; the subjectivity of the data used to assess impact; the variables and measures used vary from case to case and do not permit comparison. Pluralist approach may lead to a number of mutually conflicting accounts being generated about causality. Also the assumption that because lots of people are taking part in an exercise means that all are able to voice their concerns (so that opinions are representative) is naïve about the nature of local power relations. But for some this is not problematic since it reflects the complexity and contingency of causality in the real world.

Adapted from Herbert and Shepherd, 2001.

The ethics of impact assessment.

There are a number of ethical issues to consider when undertaking an impact assessment, as with any piece of research. Some basic questions to bear in mind are:

- Is an impact study intrinsically valuable to all stakeholders?
- Is the impact assessment purely extractive or will the findings be shared with all stakeholders?
- Can individuals involved in participatory exercises or in answering questions afford the time to do so? Are they offered payment for their involvement?
- Does the impact assessment exercise generate or exacerbate conflict?

(Roche, 1999: 35)

See also Child to Child (1991) and Abbot, D. (1998) cited in Additional Resources, and the separate entry on the ethics of researching chronic poverty (see www.chronicpoverty.org and look at the 'Methods Toolbox' for more information on this area)

Selected Resources.

Gosling, L., and Edwards, M. (1995) *Toolkits: A practical guide to assessment, monitoring, review and evaluation.'* SCF Development Manual No. 5. London, Save the Children.

Herbert, A. with Shepherd, A. (2002) *'Spin-off study: Impact Assessment for Poverty Reduction.'* International Development Department, School of Public Policy. Part of DFID funded 'Evaluation of DFID Support to Poverty Reduction' London, EvD, DFID. Forthcoming. (contact DFID Evaluation Department [via London Office], for an advance copy)

Roche, C. (1999) *'Impact Assessment for Development Agencies: Learning to Value Change.'* Development Guidelines, Oxford, Oxfam.

Thomas, A., Chataway and Wuyts, M. (eds.) (1998) *'Finding out fast: investigative skills for policy and development.'* London, Open University and Sage.

Additional Resources.

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Useful web-based resources.

Assessing the Impact of Microenterprise Services

Hyman, E.; Dearden, K. (1999) *'A Review of Impact Information Systems of NGO Microenterprise Programmes.'* AIMS (Assessing the Impact of Microenterprise Services), Washington, AIMS. [A useful text which suggests indicators for impact assessment which include qualitative enterprise-based indicators and quantitative household and livelihood-based indicators. Available through the Microfinance Best Practice website http://www.mip.org]

ID21

ID21 has several short summaries of reports where impact assessment methods have been used in donor and NGO development projects e.g. ID21 (1999) 'Impact assessments: do they measure up? Summary of 'Evaluating Impact', DFID Education Research Serial #35, edited by Veronica McKay and Carew Treffgarne (1999)
http://www.oneworld.org

International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) [largely focused on EIA]

http://www.iaia.org

ODI

Lots of material on PRSP M&E and impact assessment, including:
ODI Briefing Paper 'The impact of NGO development projects' *ODI Briefing Paper*, Number 2, May 1996
http://www.odi.org.uk

Ontario Association for Impact Assessment (OAIA) [largely focused on EIA]
The Ontario Association for Impact Assessment is an Affiliate of the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) and supports its worldwide efforts to promote impact assessment as a tool for sustainable development planning.
http://www.oaia.on.ca

Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment
Conflict Prevention and Post-Conflict Reconstruction Network (CPRN) and a network of practitioners working in the area of Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA)
http://www.bellanet.org/pcia

Social Impact Assessment Factsheet
http://hydra.gsa.gov/pbs/pt/call-in/factshet/1098b/1098bfact.htm

UNEP Environmental Impact Assessment Training Resource Manual
http://www.environment.gov.au/epg/eianet/manual/manual/title.htm

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World Bank – Poverty – Impact evaluation
http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/impact/index.htm

World Bank – CGAP – Microfinance impact assessment methodologies
http://www.cgap.org/html/p_cg_working_group_papers.html

Participatory monitoring and evaluation
http://nt1.ids.ac.uk/eldis/hot/pme.htm

List of monitoring and evaluation resources, guides and reports
http://nt1.ids.ac.uk/eldis/HOT/evaluate.htm

Development indicators
http://nt1.ids.ac.uk/eldis/hot/indicator.htm

Information on livelihoods
http://www.livelihoods.org/info/docs/Kipepeo2.rtf

Mixing Quantitative & Qualitative Approaches (information from a conference held at Cornell University in 2001)
http://www.people.cornell.edu/pages/sk145/papers/QQZ.pdf