

Insights in Complexity

Discussion about the mid-term results of PADEV: Participatory Assessment of Development

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Summary

For detailed reports: please see: <http://tinyurl.com/padev>

Introduction

After a presentation by Ton Dietz (PADEV Coordinator), Roger Bymolt (MSc student International Development Studies University of Amsterdam, and student in the PADEV Programme) and Agnieszka Kazimierczuk (junior researcher in the PADEV programme), Robert Chambers (IDS, Sussex UK) and Irene Guijt (Learning by Design, The Netherlands) responded and this was followed by a lively discussion facilitated by Kees Biekart (ISS The Hague).

Main points by Robert Chambers

The strong points of PADEV are:

- it captures local history;
- it is strong on quantifying qualitative data by stone exercises;
- its variety of tested methods is a real treasure store full of inventive approaches
- It is nice to also read about the logistics, and about things like the most adequate group size;
- It provides detailed information on organizations; and it makes collective sense of chaotic individual memories;
- It can generate practical results, useful for agencies and donors; it can also be used as a start of designing community action plans, not only as an ex-post tool
- The care and thoroughness of the approach is very good;
- It can enable different local stakeholders to discover different problem frames, and negotiate shared problem definitions;
- the question set on the why of the liking of an intervention really means innovation in evaluation/assessment practices;
- if done well it can really be a transformative experience for participants: the process is maybe more important than the results;
- some of the preliminary findings (particularly about the importance of process variables in assessing project success already deserve to be summarized in one-pagers!

Weak points are:

- it is an intensive and quite long exercise (three days with many people together and many facilitators involved);

- the results are very rich, but that results in bulky final reports (and who will read those?)
- it is not very clear for whom it is done, and what is being done with all the data;
- it is highly sensitive on the quality of facilitation (could the methodology be designed in such a way that this dependency becomes less? Make it 'facilitation proof' '!');
- the quality of the outcome depends on the efficiency of the implementation of the method;
- It is not clear who owns the (results of) the evaluation (is the result used in a transformative way?) and what added value does it have and for whom? -> answers to these questions would go into the direction of a real methodological innovation;
- It still is a 'Newtonian' way of thought: it is a manual, rather than a sourcebook, or a set of suggestions; it prescribes sequences (rather than iteration), and procedures (rather than underlying principles); the manual as it is now can be made more user friendly: what is the optimal degree of simplicity?
- Although exogenous factors of change do get attention, it is not clear what the balance is of initiative-driven change and change driven by exogenous factors.
- It is a method that seems to fit well with a rural environment in communities where many people know each other, and know the area; can it also be used in an urban setting?

Suggestion: couldn't you make the switch of mind set complete: local people as an empowering movement: knowing their own history, empowered in relation to government and NGOs. Isn't the real innovation of the approach that it goes beyond an 'assessment of development', and in fact offers tools for local history writing? Can local people be trained to be their own facilitators? Can they be assisted to initiate the process of local history writing, and could they also write the report themselves?

Main points by Irene Guijt

The PADEV approach is an important addition to the debate on 'rigor'; discussing points of attribution, and what entails a good evaluation, based on qualitative methods. It really is a toppled perspective: intended beneficiaries of development initiatives decide about assessment. The method puts the right emphasis on people's perceptions as drivers of change (and resistance to change). The manual is honest in talking about the limitations of the approach, and it experiments with a variety of set-ups. The level of scale poses intriguing questions: would working with smaller groups endanger representation?

The usefulness of PADEV with regard to learning loops is high:

single loop:	no
double loop:	yes
triple loop:	yes

Therefore, the method could not only be used in ex-post situations, but also in mid-strategy exercises (are we doing the right things right?) -> real time monitoring/attribution, and it can also be used prior to new programs and projects, or as a base line for newly starting initiatives.

The strength of PADEV is that it combines impact evaluation with context analysis. It breaks away from the 'sectoral' logic, so dominant within the current development approaches. In fact it brings back the emphasis on holistic, territorial approaches: like the ones in the 1990s (integrated rural development).

A weakness may be: how is PADEV embedded; how could Southern organizations make use of this approach?

Another question is: OK the method gives voice to the voiceless: but who would be listening? How to make reports to enable influential people and agencies to be reached with the results?

Questions from the floor

1. There is an implicit bias in the PADEV approach: it suggests a direct relation of change to (aid-related) interventions (as if social change comes from 'projects') and it somehow neglects generic policies (e.g., taxation) or contextual variables (e.g., market prices). *Response:* the listing of 'development initiatives' indeed suggests an emphasis on 'projects', but the method also puts a lot of emphasis on contextual variables, and on societal change and its driving forces (rainfall; prices of products etc.).
2. It is important to confront the agencies with the results of people's assessments, and find out how they themselves create their stories of success and failure; hence: how the PADEV method can be connected to regular forms of Programming, Monitoring and Evaluation. *Response:* this will be done in the next phase.
3. Development effectiveness is not the same as poverty alleviation effectiveness. The emphasis on the former could lead to a repetition in selection of relatively well-to-do (by a focus on the visibility of effects); this has nothing to do with ownership. *Response:* The PADEV approach puts a lot of emphasis on wealth ranking and on differentiated impact of development initiatives on wealth groups (and on gender groups, age groups, and other relevant social categories). Indeed, our preliminary findings show that the (ever more pressing) emphasis by donors on 'proven impact' and on 'fast results against set targets' results in local development agencies choosing for 'easy success': focusing on households and individuals with proven reliability. This generally excludes the poor and certainly the very poor in a community.
4. PADEV is directed at building the whole picture (holistic); not predetermining of what is emerging. In this respect it is very important who is doing the interpretation of what matters or not to the local people, and what should be discarded as non-functioning in their eyes. *Response:* indeed the facilitator, the reporter and the one doing the analysis need strict instructions not to design their own story, but enable local people to come up with their story. It is important to integrate checks and balances during and after the workshop.
5. There is the issue of self-valuing, also related to the wealth class exercise. What defines movement up; where are the gaps in people's assessment capabilities? *Response:* triangulation is crucial in the PADEV method; enabling peers to build up collective stories.
6. There will always be the issue of representativeness: who participates in these workshops? Starting with performance (people who are locally regarded as the best spokespeople for the community, or the best story tellers) will emphasize an 'in-built' selection mechanism; often working with those who already benefit. It is the art to go beyond the bias of biased people evaluating biased projects (directed at the already performing). The PADEV strength is that it combines methods (in a creative way) plus the way of facilitating people's history writing and assessment. *Response:* even if everyone in a community gets a chance to be selected as participants (e.g. by random selection), there is often an element of self-exclusion (by the very rich – they

are too busy - and certainly by the very poor – they regard themselves as unworthy, or are ashamed). Even if the (very) poor participate there may be an element of self-denial, or shyness, or not being able to follow what is going on.

7. It would be good to make use of (local) teachers and accentuate their potentially emancipatory role by asking them for a translation of the report's findings and discuss these with children who on their turn will discuss these with their families. *Response:* PADEV did work with school children (two try-outs) with surprisingly rich results, but not yet involving the teachers. That might indeed be done> Robert Chambers suggestion to use the PADEV methods as a means of local history writing and local ownership of continuous assessment of what comes from outside might be facilitated by (the right type of) teachers.
8. It would be useful to know more about the costs of PADEV versus results and usefulness of the method. *Response:* we can include that in the Manual (or Book of Suggestions, as Robert Chambers would like to see it.
9. If this PADEV approach will be up-scaled, it should be done in such a way that it becomes possible to find out what the limits of its usefulness are: it may well be that in traumatized societies, or in societies with a lot of population movements, the approach will not fit. *Response:* in nine very different cases the method seemed to work quite well, among these cases were an area traumatized by a recent major conflict, and two areas that can be regarded as very remote. But indeed: applying the approach to very different areas, and learning by comparing the findings on process and outcome can be very useful.

Dieneke de Groot/Ton Dietz/7-10-2010