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PRAGMATISM OR TRANSFORMATION? PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION OF A HUMANITARIAN EDUCATION PROJECT IN SIERRA LEONE

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Abstract: Although participatory evaluation (PE) is now widely acknowledged as a potentially useful way to assess international development assistance programs, there is little documented evidence of participatory approaches being incorporated into evaluations of humanitarian aid for populations living in emergency situations. Two principal streams, *practical participatory evaluation* (P-PE) and *transformative participatory evaluation* (T-PE), are pertinent to international aid programs. Yet because these two approaches to PE are rooted in different goals and procedures, it is unclear how pragmatic and transformative dynamics can be integral to participatory evaluations of humanitarian aid. The example of an evaluation of a humanitarian education project for displaced children in wartorn Sierra Leone reveals the practical benefits that can accrue from even limited stakeholder participation in the inquiry process. In addition, while the evaluation of rapid education was not a transformative intervention, it nonetheless generated insights into the challenges of fostering incremental social transformation in a post-war context.

Résumé: Bien qu'il soit clair que l'évaluation participative (ÉP) ait les potentialités pour des programmes d'aide internationale, il n'y a que très peu de données probantes documentées concernant les approches participatives adoptées dans les évaluations de l'aide humanitaire pour les populations en situations d'urgence. Deux courants d'évaluation participative, l'une de l'approche pratique (ÉP-P) et l'autre de l'approche transformative (ÉP-T), sont pertinents pour les programmes d'aide internationale. Mais étant donné que ces deux approches de l'ÉP sont enracinées dans des objectifs et des processus différents, il n'est pas évident que les dynamiques de pragmatisme et de transformation puissent être appliquées intégralement dans les évaluations participatives

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d'aide humanitaire. L'exemple d'une évaluation de l'éducation humanitaire pour les enfants déplacés durant la guerre civile au Sierra Léone démontre les avantages pratiques provenant de la participation même limitée dans le processus évaluatifs des parties intéressées. En outre, malgré le fait que l'évaluation de l'éducation rapide ne soit pas une intervention transformative, elle permet de porter un regard sur les défis qui entourent les efforts orientés vers une transformation sociale par étape dans un contexte d'après-guerre.

EVALUATING HUMANITARIAN AID: RATIONALE AND CONSTRAINTS

Violent civic conflict is a sad and all too frequent phenomenon, and with it the ever-present need to provide emergency assistance to populations afflicted by war. For many years humanitarian aid to victims of conflict has focused on provision for survival needs such as shelter, water, food, and primary health care. Yet with mounting awareness that the effects of war often severely curtail or distort children's natural development, many humanitarian aid agencies now include education as a priority of emergency assistance (Academy for Educational Development, 2000; Pigozzi, 1999; Retamal & Aedo-Richmond, 1998; UNESCO, 2001). The phenomenon of emergency education — or rapid education — has therefore become a common form of humanitarian relief as well as a key step toward the renewal of educational systems in war-torn societies.

Yet precisely because of the urgency that underscores support for populations uprooted by the onslaught of war, programs of emergency education and other forms of humanitarian aid are often conceived and wholly managed by aid agency personnel and ubiquitous cadres of international consultants. Rarely are target populations involved in anything but the most cursory forms of relief planning and administration (Estrella & Gaventa, 1999; Payne, 1998) While this is understandable given the desperate circumstances of people who have been uprooted by war, it has nonetheless led to concerns about the gap between humanitarian assistance and the longer term needs of populations seeking refuge and trying to recover from violent civic strife. In the view of some critics, humanitarian aid is a palliative driven by moral disquietude and strong charitable impulses, but does little to resolve the fundamental difficulties facing wartime refugees (Wheeler, 2002). For others, the rush to provide humanitarian relief too often exacerbates dependency and weakens the capacity of recipi-

ent populations to embark on their own social and economic renewal (Holzgrefe & Keohane, 2003; Terry, 2002).

Concerns about the flaws and pitfalls of humanitarian aid, and awareness of the need to ensure positive results from the relatively novel experience of emergency education programs, are prompting aid agencies to devote more attention to monitoring and evaluating their programs of humanitarian intervention. There are, however, fundamental constraints that render the evaluation of humanitarian aid more difficult than programs of development aid that generally function in reasonably stable social circumstances. Given antecedents of turbulence that necessitate humanitarian relief operations, emergency relief interventions are often conceived for short periods of time that allow limited possibility for preliminary data gathering and the establishment of adequate baseline indicators (Kaiser, 2002). In circumstances characterized by uncertainty and anxiety, time and space for rigorous research and analysis are generally constrained. Likewise, pressures for quick action to achieve short-term objectives invariably supercede considerations of local capacity building and project sustainability (Holzgrefe & Keohane, 2003; Kaiser).

Nevertheless, with growing demand for accountability and effective assessments of emergency relief projects, it has become necessary to document evaluations of humanitarian interventions in diverse social and programmatic contexts (Hoffman, Roberts, Shoham, & Harvey, 2004). In light of growing appreciation of the inherent capacities of dispossessed populations and their long-term development needs, it is likewise becoming essential to shed light on the practice and potential of involving local beneficiaries as participants in evaluations of humanitarian aid (e.g., Sphere Project Handbook, 2004). The purpose of this article, therefore, is to describe the merits as well as the limitations of stakeholder participation in one recent evaluation of an emergency rapid education project that had been established for children living in camps for internally displaced people in wartorn Sierra Leone. As the article shows, the limited participatory approach adopted for this particular evaluation helped to generate several pragmatic benefits for all stakeholder groups. In addition, while local participation did not generate any fundamental social change beyond the limited scope of the project under investigation, it did yield insights into the challenges of attempting to foster incremental social transformation in a post-war context.

PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION AND INTERNATIONAL AID: PRAGMATISM VERSUS SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Participatory approaches to evaluation have so far rarely been adopted in the realm of international humanitarian relief (Hoffman et al., 2004; Kaiser, 2002). In contrast, however, there have been many efforts to conduct participatory evaluations of conventional longer-term development aid programs. In large part this has been the result of heightened awareness of the possibilities of mutual reinforcement between the aims of development assistance and the ways in which such assistance is evaluated. Just as ideas of grassroots participation, stakeholder partnership, and shared ownership have infused the discourse of international development aid within the last two decades (Chambers, 1983; Clark, 1995; King & Buchert, 1999; Maclure, 2000), so too have these ideas generated perspectives concerning the democratization of development program evaluations. In ideal terms, development aid is provided to enable populations to eventually attain self-reliance and pursue their own long-term socio-economic interests. Viewed in this light, since the success of external aid is a function of the degree to which recipients are able to participate in decisions and processes that affect them directly, it follows that these same people should be privy to the processes of inquiry that illuminate the strengths and the weaknesses of such assistance (Binnendijk, 2000; Faure, 2004; Samoff & Stromquist, 2001). From this perspective, the performance and outcomes of aid projects are likely to be enhanced, and the capacities of recipient groups strengthened, when local stakeholders are directly involved in key aspects of project evaluations. As Samoff (2001) has observed, this particular view of the evaluation of international aid "assumes that the most useful information is likely to be most readily available to those involved in the activity and thus expects evaluators to be participant observers, not detached onlookers.... Acting on whatever is learned from the evaluation is presumed to require that those involved in the activity assume ownership through central participation in the evaluation itself" (p. 14).

Not surprisingly, therefore, this discussion of the intersecting purposes of evaluation and international aid has led to increased interest in participatory evaluation (PE) as a way to combine the objective of improving the efficacy of international aid with efforts to strengthen the social capital of recipient populations (Freeman, Balani, Faure, & Maclure, 2003; Lavergne, 2004; Schacter, 2000). Of particular appeal is the underlying PE characteristic of partnership between professional evaluators and those individuals or groups who have a

stake in the projects that are being evaluated. In such collaborative endeavours, since local stakeholders usually have limited or no evaluation experience, a key role of professional evaluators is to provide training and to facilitate stakeholder involvement in different stages of the inquiry process. In this way stakeholders can gain more familiarity with evaluation methods and thus be in a position to assume greater responsibility for data collection and analysis, and for the interpretation of findings (Cousins & Earl, 1995). With collaboration and hands-on learning as ongoing elements of the evaluation process, project stakeholders can ideally attain a degree of ownership over evaluations that will enable them to subsequently participate actively in decisions and actions that stem from evaluation results (Patton, 1997).

Of course practices of participatory evaluation are anything but uniform. As studies of PE have shown, levels of stakeholder participation can vary widely in breadth (i.e., in terms of the numbers of people actively involved in different phases of an evaluation) and in depth (i.e., the extent of their participation and their control of the different phases) (Cousins & Earl, 1995). Such variations in participation often relate to the types of programs being evaluated, the differences in context, the diversity and capacity of the participants, and the objectives of PE itself (Cousins, 2005). Despite this variability, however, Cousins and Whitmore (1998) have suggested that overall there are two principal streams of PE that correspond loosely to two broad functions, both of which are especially pertinent to international aid. The first stream is identified by its pragmatic objectives. Defined by Cousins and Whitmore as *practical participatory evaluation* (P-PE), the main premise of this approach is that stakeholder involvement in evaluation can help to broaden program-related decision making and problem solving. Primarily instrumental in its objectives, P-PE has often been highly effective in enhancing the authenticity of collected information and the subsequent utilization of results (Cousins & Whitmore). Benefiting from stakeholder ownership as an inherent aspect of the investigative process, P-PE and related forms of inquiry can lead to the improvement of projects or programs and, at the same time, enhance the knowledge base of sponsoring organizations (Patton, 1997).

Rather differently, the second stream of PE is oriented toward the ideals of emancipation and social justice. Defined by Cousins and Whitmore (1998) as *transformative participatory evaluation* (T-PE), this approach to PE stems from radical critiques of conventional forms

of scientific research and a discernment of the interconnectedness of knowledge and power (Fals-Borda & Anisur-Rahman, 1991; Foucault, 1980). By engaging project recipients as evaluation collaborators, T-PE is seen as a "bottom-up" form of inquiry designed to empower marginalized social groups and to facilitate their resistance against oppressive social structures. While the acquisition of knowledge and understanding is deemed to be important, what is central to T-PE is that it heightens participants' critical consciousness and thus their capacity to take collective action (Fernandes & Tandon, 1981; Freire, 1994). Through the processes of collaboration and shared learning between professional evaluators and socio-economically disadvantaged stakeholders, T-PE can serve as a basis for promoting fundamental social change that is beneficial to the poor and the voiceless.

These two orientations of PE are rooted in different goals and procedures that pose a unique challenge for international aid agencies. On the one side, evaluations of development aid projects almost inevitably focus on pragmatic assessments of project efficacy in order to satisfy the accountability needs of northern funding sources. Yet, on the other side, if external aid incorporates a capacity-building approach designed to assist recipient groups in transforming their conditions of poverty and marginalization, then project evaluation should also contribute to this transformative process. These two streams of pragmatism and transformation, and the purposes that they serve, are not easily reconciled, particularly in the realm of international aid which has long been infused by tensions between the divergent interests of benefactors and recipients of aid. Consequently, while many aid agencies have formally accepted the idea of PE as a potentially useful way to combine project assessment with community development, as yet the laudatory rhetoric surrounding PE still far outstrips demonstrable practices (Meier, 1999; Samoff, 1999). A key reason for this lies in the distinction between the notions of partnership and ownership (Faure, 2004). While ostensibly aid agencies can easily establish partner relations with recipient stakeholders, partnership is often configured in a way that reinforces the explicit agendas of aid agencies and relegates local stakeholders to tasks that are mainly consultative. In contrast, stakeholder ownership is suggestive of a transferance of power that many aid agencies, for reasons related to budgetary procedures, project timelines, and political constraints, are often reluctant to cede.

Overall, therefore, although the principles of beneficiary participation and partnership in evaluations of international development aid

have been generally accepted, in practice, participatory evaluation is replete with difficulties and constraints. This then raises a key question: Given the difference between development aid and emergency humanitarian assistance, what are the challenges in attempting to evaluate humanitarian aid using a participatory approach? Moreover, while the engagement of local stakeholders as *bona fide* participants in the process of evaluating humanitarian aid may help to enhance the practical ends of project effectiveness, can a participatory approach to evaluation help to transform the circumstances of groups of people who are beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance precisely because of their situations of vulnerability and dependence? Although we are far from establishing conclusive responses to these questions, the following review of an evaluation conducted in Sierra Leone does provide insights into the possibilities as well as constraints of adopting a participatory approach to humanitarian aid evaluations.

THE EVALUATION OF PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S RAPID EDUCATION PROJECT

The Rapid Education Project

PLAN International (formerly Foster Parents Plan International) is an international nongovernmental organization (NGO) that provides development assistance in more than 40 underdeveloped countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Most of its funding emanates from private donations in northern industrial countries, and this is supplemented by grants from bilateral donor agencies (e.g., CIDA in Canada). Since 1978 PLAN has managed a development assistance program in Sierra Leone. Throughout the 1990s, however, the vicissitudes of Sierra Leone's savage 10-year civil war forced the organization to severely curtail its aid program in the country. Yet, unlike many other aid agencies, PLAN retained an office in the capital city of Freetown throughout the conflict.

In January 1999, the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) launched a major assault on Freetown that left much of the city in ruins. Thousands of civilians, many of whom were refugees from the interior of the country, were forced to flee to internally displaced people's (IDP) camps that were hastily set up in those areas of the city controlled by a Nigerian-led military presence that had intervened to resist rebel forces on behalf of the ECOMOG (the Economic Community of West African State Monitoring Group). After a month of fierce fighting, ECOMOG forces eventually drove the RUF out of

the city. Yet the vast majority of people who had gathered in the IDP camps opted to remain for fear of once again being caught up in the crossfires of war. In the weeks that followed the RUF invasion, groups of camp inhabitants began to organize recreational and learning activities for young people using the barest resources at hand. In March 1999, PLAN staff decided to assist these incipient classes by developing a rapid education project (REP) for children living in four IDP camps.

In consultation with Sierra Leone's Ministry of Education (MoE), PLAN developed its REP as a short-term pilot project with two immediate objectives: (a) to provide basic literacy and numeracy instruction to camp children who had never been to school or who had experienced prolonged absence from school as a result of their displacement, and (b) to provide a series of recreational and reflective activities that together would comprise "peace education" and a collective "trauma healing" process for camp children who had suffered psychologically as well as physically from the conflict. A third longer-term objective of the project was to develop the foundations of a fully formed and operationalized rapid education methodology that would serve as a prototype in regions of the country where schools had been destroyed and where children would be in urgent need of structured routines and purposeful learning once the war was over. In order to gauge the extent to which these objectives were met, the project included an evaluation component.

A principal assumption underlying PLAN's pilot REP was that the war in Sierra Leone would soon be ending and that, within a year, most displaced people would be able to return to their home regions, thus enabling children to resume their education in more stable circumstances. By mid-2000, however, despite a peace accord that had been signed by all beligerents a year earlier, it had become clear that hopes for an imminent end to the hostilities had been overly optimistic. The security situation in the country was still volatile, and most IDP camp inhabitants were unable to leave the camps. With no educational alternative to the REP, parents in the camps anxiously looked to PLAN to continue supporting three IDP camps schools. (The fourth school, adjacent to an outlying village, was transformed into a government-supported "normal school" in the fall of 2000.) Unfortunately these parental concerns did not accord with PLAN's intention to disengage from what it considered to have been a short-term emergency relief project. Although PLAN had extended its administration of the REP till July (the end of the school year), by

September 2000 its REP personnel had left Freetown for Moyambe District, a government-controlled region that was relatively secure from rebel attack. It was here, as part of the renewal of its development aid program, that PLAN was preparing to initiate a new round of rapid education projects as a basis for the long-term reconstruction of district schooling that had been almost completely destroyed by the war. From PLAN's perspective, by the summer of 2000, the only unfinished aspect of its pilot REP in Freetown was the summative evaluation of the project itself. This was not, however, the perspective of IDP camp inhabitants, a factor that emerged as significant through direct stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process.

The Evaluation

In early spring 2000, I was asked by PLAN International to conduct an evaluation of the REP. Two broad questions formed the basis of the terms of reference: (a) To what extent had the project enhanced the basic education of children, particularly in terms of literacy and numeracy achievements? (b) What lessons could be gleaned from the pilot project that would facilitate the development of a more extensive rapid education program in districts where PLAN was intending to help reconstruct shattered school systems? (A separate evaluation that I was not involved in was commissioned to assess the relative effectiveness of the "trauma healing" component of the project.) As a former PLAN field director now teaching in a faculty of education, I agreed to conduct the evaluation on condition that a team be formed that would consist of individuals who had been actively involved in the day-to-day implementation of the REP. Accordingly, after a month of discussion between PLAN, IDP camp representatives, and the MoE in Freetown, a team was put together consisting of one other external evaluator, the head teachers of the REP schools in each of the four IDP camps, two senior MoE officials, and PLAN's regional program advisor, who had been instrumental in setting up the pilot project. In total the designated team consisted of two external consultants (of whom I was one) and seven "insider" (stakeholder) members.

The evaluation was conducted in three phases. The first phase consisted of developing and fine-tuning a questionnaire that was administered to 36 IDP camp teachers in Freetown at the end of August 2000. The second stage comprised a two-week period in September during which the team undertook extensive interviewing and observations in the four IDP camps. It was also the only time that I was in Sierra Leone during the course of the evaluation. In order to conduct

fieldwork effectively in the relatively short time period allotted, the team divided itself into two subgroups, each consisting of one external evaluator and two stakeholder evaluators (the head teachers). The other team members — PLAN's regional program advisor and the two MoE officials — were assigned to be "floaters" who would attach themselves to each subgroup at different times whenever their schedules permitted. (As it turned out, the involvement of the two MoE officials in camp interviews was sporadic due to other pressing demands on their time.) Intermittently throughout the fieldwork stage, the two external evaluators also conducted interviews with local PLAN staff at the PLAN office. All interviews with individual teachers and PLAN staff, and all focus group interviews with camp leaders and parents, were audiotaped with the permission of the respondents. Interviews with a small number of children were also conducted, but eventually discarded by the evaluation team as they were not sufficiently informative.

The fieldwork stage of the evaluation culminated in a "rapid appraisal seminar" in which the team presented its preliminary findings and recommendations to a gathering of PLAN staff and other interested parties. Among those present were PLAN's West Africa regional director who had arrived from Senegal for the meeting, officials of the MoE, and the head of the Federation of African Women Educators (FAWE), a national organization with experience in rapid education for war-affected children. Beginning with a brief formal presentation by the evaluation team, the seminar evolved into an animated discussion that carried over into a scheduled lunch and lasted another two hours. The conclusion of the seminar ended the fieldwork stage of the evaluation, and I departed Freetown in the evening.

The third stage of the evaluation was devoted to an SPSS analysis of the questionnaire data, a content analysis of interview transcripts, and the writing of the report. As had been agreed, I undertook these tasks with the help of the second external evaluator. As we both had other full-time occupations, this process took several months. In March 2001, I sent a draft of the entire report to Freetown for local stakeholders' perusal and feedback, and in July the final report was submitted to PLAN International.

Levels of participation among the designated evaluation participants varied considerably and, at best, were sporadic during the first and third stages of the evaluation. Yet during the second stage of the evaluation, five out of the seven stakeholder participants assumed a

prominent role in the inquiry. As intended, their active involvement in data collection and daily debriefing sessions facilitated the pragmatic purpose of assessing the effectiveness of the REP. By functioning as full-fledged evaluation team members working on their own "home turf," they were also able to broaden the scope of the evaluation to include an assessment of the future of the IDP schools. In effect, modest stakeholder participation brought about an adjustment to the evaluation's original terms of reference. This in itself was a notable development that I shall now explain in more depth. Yet it also raised the question as to whether such an adjustment was essentially a manifestation of pragmatic project change, or whether it reflected a transformative feature of the evaluation. In resolving this question, it is first important to fully discern the nature of stakeholder participation in the evaluation of this particular humanitarian aid project.

STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION: CONTINGENCIES AND CONSTRAINTS

Throughout much of the REP evaluation the participation of the local stakeholders was actually quite limited. In part this was due to the "long-distance" leadership structure of the evaluation, since I was not fully engaged with either PLAN in Sierra Leone or with the REP project. Nevertheless, the openness to local stakeholder participation, coupled with my absence from Sierra Leone, did affect the selection of team members. The PLAN office in Freetown, in conjunction with IDP camp leaders and MoE officials, assumed the responsibility of identifying key local stakeholder evaluators. This resulted in the selection of the four *head* teachers of the IDP camp schools, two *senior* MoE officials, and only one PLAN staff member (who had been actively involved in establishing the REP, but had left Sierra Leone soon after the REP had been launched). There was only one female — a head teacher — among this group. At the outset, therefore, the espoused participatory nature of the evaluation had resulted in the exclusion of regular volunteer teachers and the lack of balanced gender representation. Although the four head teachers were highly capable and collegial individuals who appeared to have the full confidence of their fellow teachers and camp inhabitants, they nonetheless clearly did not reflect the demographic makeup of IDP camp teaching personnel.

While selection of the team was conducted locally, for the most part the actual participation of team members during the initial phase was essentially reactive and consultative. Conscious as I was that

the evaluation's terms of reference had been determined by PLAN International (the "owner" of the project) and that most of my work would have to be done far from Sierra Leone within a specified time frame, I took on the role of a conventional team leader whose principal aim was to obtain comprehensive information on the pilot REP as efficiently and expeditiously as possible. This was exemplified by my relatively top-down approach in developing the teacher questionnaire. As well, time constraints and the distances that separated me from the Sierra Leonean team members in the first stage of the evaluation precluded any possibility of pre-evaluation training. Consequently, during the first two days of collaborative fieldwork, I was clearly the "leader," with instruction and learning in interviewing techniques being conducted *in situ* in the camps.

Once the second stage of the evaluation was underway, the four head teachers and the PLAN regional coordinator who participated fully in the fieldwork were "quick studies." As data collection proceeded in social contexts that they knew far better than I, these five individuals assumed an increasingly significant role as interviewers in the camps and as participants in our daily debriefing sessions. Their prominence as team partners culminated in the rapid appraisal seminar. It was in this brief closing period of the fieldwork stage of the evaluation that the Sierra Leonean stakeholders, including the MoE officials who until then had been only minimally involved in data collection, assumed control of the discussion. At this critical juncture of the evaluation, with representatives of all stakeholders grouped together to review preliminary findings and interpretations, the Sierra Leonean members of the evaluation team displayed their ownership over the process by focusing primarily on the issue of the future of the three remaining IDP camp schools. By situating this IDP camp preoccupation squarely in the centre of the seminar discussion, they effectively extended the scope of the evaluation beyond its original terms of reference.

On completion of the fieldwork, however, with no possibility of reconvening the entire evaluation team at a later date, stakeholder participation in the evaluation abruptly ended. Essentially this was because I was responsible for comprehensive data analysis and report writing back in Canada. Only once, in March 2001, did the four head teachers and the two MoE officials reconvene to review a draft of the final report and to suggest minor modifications in the text. By that time, as I came to learn, discussion of the written report was largely redundant for the Sierra Leonean stakeholders. Within a month of the evaluation fieldwork, as I was just beginning to organize and analyze

the data in Canada, PLAN had disengaged from the IDP camps and had embarked on a full-fledged program of expanding the REP into 46 communities in Moyambe District. In doing so, it incorporated the evaluation team's preliminary recommendations concerning procurement arrangements, methods of monitoring and supervision, the content and quality of pedagogical materials, and honoraria for volunteer teachers, all of which had been presented and discussed in the rapid appraisal seminar that had closed the fieldwork stage of the evaluation. Indeed, it was the rapid appraisal seminar that the local stakeholders had animated, not my formal written report as team leader, which enabled the various interested parties in Sierra Leone to work out a consensus regarding the future of the IDP camp schools. As I shall now discuss, this consensus had practical benefits for all sides. Yet there was something more: an intimation of transformation as destitute camp inhabitants undertook to ensure the sustainability of *their* IDP camp schools through the evaluative process.

DIMENSIONS OF PRAGMATISM

The decision to conduct the REP evaluation using a participatory approach was taken for essentially pragmatic reasons. I agreed to conduct the evaluation only if a number of Sierra Leoneans who had direct experience or knowledge of the REP were to be included as members of an evaluation team. As a Canadian university professor with limited time available for fieldwork in Sierra Leone, I was convinced that a team consisting of project stakeholders — PLAN staff, MoE officials, and IDP camp teachers — would enhance the efficiency and the quality of data collection and analysis. Such an approach would also help to make up for my own lack of familiarity with the project and with the uniqueness of Sierra Leone's wartime situation. Guided by PLAN's terms of reference which established the parameters of the evaluation, my reasoning was entirely pragmatic. I gave little thought to the notion of empowering local people.

Because of the long-distance nature of team leadership, the most active period of stakeholder participation was the fieldwork stage of data collection and preliminary field-based analysis. Even during this stage, the breadth and representativeness of stakeholder participation was limited, with only five fully active participants, of whom four were head teachers and only one was female. Nevertheless, the engagement of these individuals as partners in interviewing camp teachers and parents, and in observing IDP camp school activity, contributed significantly to the pragmatic ends of the evaluation.

Because they had been intimately involved in the REP and had the full confidence of all other stakeholders, the evaluation team had easy access to camp inhabitants and were able to conduct interviews that were comprehensive and highly informative. The combined insider/outsider approach to fieldwork likewise reinforced the quality of the observations that were made and helped animate debriefing sessions that were held to review each day's proceedings. The remarkable collegiality that quickly emerged among those of us conducting fieldwork greatly enhanced our ability to identify the strengths and the weaknesses of the REP.

In the rapid appraisal seminar that rounded out the fieldwork stage of the inquiry, the evaluation team expressed its unanimous view, based on the evidence collected, that on the whole the REP had been successful. It had clearly enhanced children's basic literacy and numeracy skills and had helped to foster a safe and structured environment for war-affected children through the combination of recreational activities (sports, dancing, and role playing) and reflective activities (drawing, clay sculpting, and storywriting). Although "peace education" had not been fully developed or implemented through the REP, the evaluation team nonetheless recommended that a fully developed curricular component concerning peace and conflict resolution should be an integral feature of future rapid education interventions. Other problems relating to content and delivery were observed, but the evaluation team concluded that these could be easily rectified and that PLAN should proceed with expanding its REP as a basis for educational reconstruction and renewal in Moyambe District and other areas where hostilities had ceased (Maclure, 2001).

These findings were in keeping with the original questions that PLAN had specified at the outset of the evaluation. Yet the participatory orientation of the evaluation also led to the inclusion of the issue that was of greatest concern to the local stakeholder participants: how to ensure continuation of the three remaining IDP camp schools. Three of the four head teachers, who were camp inhabitants themselves and were key actors in the camp schools, had a vested personal stake in the survival of these schools. Likewise, PLAN's regional program advisor, who had devoted considerable time and effort in launching the pilot project in 1999, felt much stronger empathy for the parents and teachers in the camps than did his colleagues in PLAN's Freetown office. As well, since the two senior MoE officials were fearful of being saddled with camp school closures and ensuing parental frustration and resentment, they were naturally hoping that resources could

somehow be made available to ensure the continuation of the camp schools. These sentiments were all strongly reinforced through interviews with teachers and parents in the IDP camps.

As the fieldwork had progressed, the head teachers swiftly assumed a confident sense of their role as evaluation partners. This "deepening" of stakeholder participation culminated in a significant shift in control and ownership during the brief critical juncture of the rapid appraisal seminar. At the start of the seminar, the four head teachers and PLAN's regional program advisor who presented the team's preliminary findings spoke as acknowledged *evaluators*. Yet when the more open, freewheeling discussion ensued after the formal team presentation, these five individuals, as well as the two MoE officials who had been marginal during much of the data-collection process, began to speak as REP *stakeholders*, each with a particular set of interests and concerns relating to their own positions and those of other stakeholders in the camps and in the MoE. The head teachers took a position on behalf of children's right to education in the camps and argued for external support to ensure that this imperative was met. The two MoE officials spoke about issues that were of concern to the ministry, particularly about regulations related to formal recognition of "normal schools" and the limits of the ministry's capacity to support the existing IDP camp schools. For his part, PLAN's regional program advisor spoke as someone caught between two contending perspectives — agreeing with PLAN's position about the need to refocus on longer-term community development in Moyambe District, yet concurrently empathizing with IDP camp inhabitants who were anxious to prolong PLAN's support for a project that he himself had worked hard to bring about. In effect, the participatory orientation of the evaluation had enabled these individuals to expand the evaluation's terms of reference by incorporating the unanimous opinion of parents and teachers that the three remaining IDP schools be continued. Their involvement as *bona fide* evaluation participants added legitimacy to these demands. This, of course, was fully in line with the pragmatic basis of the participatory approach — to enrich the evaluation process by rendering explicit different stakeholder perceptions and agendas regarding the rapid education project.

To their credit, PLAN staff listened to what was being said and made the necessary adjustment to the satisfaction of all sides. A result of this dialogue was a compromise agreement to ensure the continuation of the three IDP camp schools. Within one month of evaluation fieldwork, in response to a joint overture from PLAN and the MoE,

FAWE agreed to replace PLAN as the formal administrative and supervisory sponsor of the three camp schools throughout the 2000–01 school year. For its part, PLAN agreed to transfer funds to FAWE for purposes of ensuring the necessary financial support of the project for an additional year. This was an arrangement that was satisfactory to all parties: to the IDP camp inhabitants whose children could continue with their schooling; to PLAN which was able to shift its attention away from emergency relief to educational reconstruction and community renewal elsewhere in the country; to FAWE which was able to extend its influence and credibility as a key organizational player in Sierra Leone's efforts to rebuild its educational sytem; and to the MoE with its vested interest in the expansion of children's enrolment in schools of all types despite its chronic lack of adequate resources.

Two further pragmatic dimensions of the participatory approach were unforeseen and can be regarded as offshoots of the evaluation. Having collaborated as evaluation team members, three out of the four head teachers who had been "insider" evaluators were subsequently hired contractually by PLAN to act as teacher trainers for the expanding education program in Moyambe District. With their abilities and experiences as rapid education teachers and their newfound understanding of PLAN's mandate, they were amply qualified to contribute to PLAN's expanded program of rapid education. The fourth head teacher continued as director of the erstwhile IDP camp school, which had been transformed into a normal school in September 2000. In addition, a further indirect outcome of the participatory nature of the evaluation was PLAN's success in securing a large U.K. grant for its Sierra Leonean program. In its bid for the grant, PLAN included the final report of the REP evaluation and made a point of highlighting its participatory approach (personal communication from PLAN staff in the U.K.).

INSIGHTS FOR INCREMENTAL SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Through the incorporation of a modest participatory approach, the REP evaluation achieved some practical results. It was not, however, a transformative process, nor did it directly engender social transformation. Only five stakeholders were fully involved in the fieldwork stage of the inquiry, and their role served mainly to enhance the authenticity of findings and broaden the scope of the ensuing recommendations. The evaluation itself did not address structures of oppression, nor did it result in the mobilization or empowerment of

IDP camp inhabitants. Essentially this was a practical participatory evaluation (P-PE) of a small, discrete pilot project. Nevertheless, limited though it was, stakeholder participation in the REP was not an entirely instrumental exercise. Apart from the parameters of the pilot project, the participatory process did help in a small way to strengthen local capacity and to heighten stakeholder consciousness of issues that do, in the long run, have import for the inherently incremental process of social change in post-war Sierra Leone.

Beyond the practical ends of facilitating the expansion of the REP (for PLAN) and sustaining the remaining three camp schools (for IDP inhabitants), the evaluation also generated insights into the complex nature of education as a form of emergency humanitarian relief. This was particularly useful for PLAN which had had extensive experience with education as a form of community development but had not reckoned on some of the difficulties and challenges arising out of this altogether different approach to educational intervention. The involvement of the head teachers and ministry officials in the evaluation helped to sharpen the sensibilities of PLAN personnel regarding the perceptions of parents and teachers in the three remaining IDP camps about being "abandoned" by the very benefactor that had enabled their children to regain a sense of normalcy through schooling. In effect this underscored the interrelationship between rapid top-down intervention as a necessary means to alleviate humanitarian crises and the problem of recipient dependency on organizations providing emergency relief. For PLAN International, and indeed all other agencies engaged in the provision of humanitarian aid, such heightened understanding of the dilemmas and challenges of humanitarian aid is crucial if these agencies are to provide assistance in an enabling fashion, that is, in a manner that strengthens rather than inhibits the capacities of local people who have been forced into situations of marginality and uncertainty (Roche, 1999). This modest participatory evaluation contributed to PLAN's organizational learning and its understanding of the complexities of initiating a rapid education program as a first stage in the reconstruction of post-war community schooling.

Somewhat conversely, participation in the evaluation augmented the head teachers' understanding of the challenges and constraints confronting PLAN as an organization with a limited mandate to engage in the provision of humanitarian emergency relief. Their frustration at the outset of the evaluation with what they had perceived as PLAN's dismissive arrogance in terminating support of the

three remaining IDP camp schools was replaced by an appreciation of an NGO which had neither the mandate nor the administrative experience to provide long-term humanitarian support to displaced populations. In turn, this heightened their awareness of the dilemma of relying on one international NGO to sustain a long-term endeavour such as children's education, even in apparently transient IDP camp circumstances. This became a topic of discussion in the rapid appraisal seminar that ended the fieldwork stage of the evaluation and eventually helped to bring about an arrangement of diverse sources of support, including a more active engagement of the MoE. Indeed, a year later, at the start of the 2001–02 school year, the three remaining IDP camp schools were granted the status of "normal schools" within the government education system, largely because many of the camp inhabitants had decided to settle permanently in the Freetown area. At the time of writing, while FAWE has continued to monitor and provide material support for these schools from its own operating budget, the MoE is now responsible for hiring and paying teaching personnel. PLAN is no longer involved and the schools have attained a sustainable footing.

CONCLUSION

This evaluation of one relatively small humanitarian aid project in western Africa was an instance of *process becoming progress* (Samoff, 2001). While a set of specific objectives established by the sponsoring NGO served as the terms of reference for the evaluation, the participatory approach that was fully activated during the period of data collection and preliminary analysis facilitated mutual insider/outsider learning that enabled local stakeholders to transform anxiety about the immediate future of three IDP camp schools into a central issue of deliberation and resolution. This was in keeping with the pragmatic purposes of the evaluation — to enhance rapid emergency education to the satisfaction of all stakeholder groups. In most respects, therefore, this evaluation adhered to the principles of a practical participatory approach.

Yet in the context of wartorn Sierra Leone, at a time when hostilities were clearly on the wane and a process of daunting societal reconstruction was in the offing, the involvement of a number of key local stakeholders in the evaluation did contribute to reflections on the part of both the benefactor NGO and the IDP camp beneficiaries that went beyond the instrumental purposes of the pilot REP. From the extensive discussions that occurred during the collaborative field-

work stage of the evaluation, it became apparent to all parties that not only were people in the IDP camps dependent on external aid to transform their situation of destitution, but that in a real sense all Sierra Leoneans were confronted with a major post-conflict social transformation that would inevitably be a long-term, incremental process requiring extensive financial and technical assistance. For this to be successful, myriad interventions would have to aim at strengthening local capacities that would serve as the foundations of a more peaceful, more effectively governed society. At all stages of this process, the principles of local participation and stakeholder ownership would clearly be essential if interventions were to contribute to this incremental process. In a small way, the evaluation of PLAN's rapid education pilot project, by involving a small number of local stakeholders at a key stage in the evaluation, exemplified these principles.

Nevertheless, as a participatory assessment of a humanitarian aid project, the evaluation remained limited in scope, mainly because it was initially designed as a conventional summative assessment to be conducted by an external consultant. Although modified to include a few local stakeholders, it continued to be constrained by a "long-distance" leadership structure that did not allow for a combination of broad-based and more in-depth stakeholder participation. Had the evaluation been designed from the outset as a form of ongoing project monitoring, with IDP parents and teachers regularly providing assessments of project processes, it could have been a more integral feature of the REP itself and a more substantial capacity-building exercise. An evident lesson from the evaluation of PLAN's rapid education project in Sierra Leone is that there is substantive value in including the beneficiaries of humanitarian aid as participants in the assessment of such aid.

The experience of REP evaluation also highlights the challenges and limitations that confront external evaluators who are attuned to the possibilities of participatory approaches. While humanitarian aid agency personnel and external consultants can design participatory evaluations for pragmatic ends, they are unlikely to do so with the aim of effecting social transformation among impoverished or dislocated populations. This would be tantamount to outsiders developing a blueprint that marginalized people would then be expected to implement. (Unfortunately mechanisms of international aid are still highly susceptible to this type of patronizing approach.) Instead, if participatory evaluations are to augment the knowledge and capacities of local

people that will enable them to initiate actions for themselves, then outsiders must be willing to cede control of those aspects of evaluation that are particularly meaningful for local stakeholders.

Frequently, of course, the transfer of control does tend to create an aura of uncertainty and risk for all stakeholders in the process. For outside organizations and evaluators, it may result in a shift away from their original terms of reference and require them to confront unexpected challenges that are discomfiting and imply undesired policy or program changes (Sphere Project Handbook, 2004). For local stakeholders, while attainment of shared evaluation ownership can enhance collective understanding and the capacity to initiate changes that respond to their own concerns and needs, it can also harbour the prospect of generating false hopes and, in the event that changes do not occur, subsequent tension and disillusion (Sphere Project Handbook). Inevitably, however, shifts in the dynamics of leadership and control as a prelude to fundamental change are always fraught with elements of risk. For populations coping with the effects of humanitarian crises, particularly of the sort that wrought deadly havoc in Sierra Leone, such risks are not likely to sway them from willingly participating in processes that directly affect them.

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