



Social Protection, Livelihoods and ‘Structural Gaps’: Impact Assessment as Stories of Social Change

NAILA KABEER 

RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

Impact assessments form a significant strand of research in development studies because they assess the extent to which policy efforts to bring about desired forms of change in a society succeed in their objectives. In frequently under-researched countries in the Global South, these assessments can tell important stories about how change happens in such contexts, what promotes it and what blocks it, but only if they incorporate methodologies that enable them to do so. In the absence of such methodologies, assessments merely provide information on whether an intervention worked or not, but not how, why (or why not) and for whom. This paper uses examples of impact assessments of social protection measures in the Global South to demonstrate how a poor understanding of gender, livelihoods and households in different contexts can lead to conclusions that either misrepresent local realities or fail to capture relevant aspects of them.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Naila Kabeer

Department of International
Development/International
Inequalities Institute, London
School of Economics, UK
n.kabeer@lse.ac.uk

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In 2006 I was among a group of scholars working on the Global South who were invited by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to consider what lessons we could learn from Nordic approaches to gender equality and to draw lessons from our research for Nordic scholars and policy makers. The project gave us an unusual opportunity to scrutinise a part of the world that did not normally come within the purview of our research. A striking memory I carried away from that experience was our collective envy at the detailed, up-to-date *and* gender-disaggregated data that was available to Swedish policy makers and academics. Indeed, Akanji's contribution to the edited volume that came out of our project was precisely on this topic [1]. It discussed in detail a booklet ('That Little Book') that was published every two years by Statistics Sweden and provided a detailed statistical overview of different aspects of the situation of men and women in Sweden. Akanji stressed the use made of this wealth of evidence in processes of policy making, planning and advocacy in Sweden and contrasted it with the dearth of good data in the African context where she worked.

This absence of good data, characteristic of many Southern contexts, is only partly a reflection of limited resources. Ali and Mann [2] point to the 'complex process of intellectual narrowing' in which both external and internal pressures have played a role. External reform processes have curtailed the policy autonomy of these countries while internal processes frequently silence heterodox voices or simply, as Akanji pointed out, fail to recognise the value of evidence. Intellectual narrowing has been further encouraged by the spread of a consultancy culture within universities in the South as poorly paid academics 'morph' their research work into consultancy contracts as a way of making ends meet [3]. Research has become less a means for these scholars to understand their own social realities and more a response to helping donors and governments intervene in these social realities in ways they consider appropriate. One result of this is that impact assessments have gained increasing prominence in externally funded research.

On its own, this need not be a problem since such assessments can be carried out in different ways. They can, of course, be undertaken for purely instrumental reasons to serve interests dictated by governments and donors. But they can also be conceptualised in broad terms to help government and citizens of a country to better understand how changes takes place in a country, given its social realities. While a great deal of social change in any country takes place as the result of larger macro-structural forces, described as 'immanent change', a great deal also takes place as 'intended change', driven by policy interventions [4]. Impact assessments are undertaken in order to explore whether these purposive efforts succeed or fail in their objectives. Understanding their outcomes, whether positive or negative, and the processes that underlie them enriches the understanding of how change happens in a particular context, fails to happen or happens in unexpected ways, and hence the ability to manage it more effectively in the future.

I will be drawing on the literature on social protection measures to illustrate the learning potential often contained, but not always exploited, in impact assessments. Although the language of social protection is relatively recent, concern with the problems it seeks to address goes back several decades. There was a long-standing assumption that developing countries were too poor to afford 'social security' systems, that these constituted consumption/welfare expenditures and hence a drain on scarce resources that needed to be invested in growth-enhancing measures [5]. And indeed most of these countries had very truncated social welfare systems, largely confined to the minority of their populations in formal employment.

However, while the issue of affordability may have been true of the complex social security programmes of Western welfare states, these did not constitute some universal model for social security provision. Many forms of direct support to vulnerable sections of populations in poorer countries were used with considerable success [5, 6]. Moreover, the assumption that they were a drain on public resources came under challenge as an expanding body of impact studies began to show not only that support for the livelihood efforts of the poor could contribute directly to growth, but also that investments in what was previously seen as consumption or welfare – such as health, nutrition and education – contributed to basic wellbeing in the short term and to economic growth over time [7, 8]. In other words, these

initial assumptions had been grounded in misplaced assumptions about the empirical realities of countries in the Global South.

My rationale for selecting impact assessments of social protection measures to make my argument is that they are very good way to learn about change in the lives and livelihoods of poor and marginalised groups. They are generally directed towards groups that are regarded as disadvantaged within a society and represent efforts to address the various ‘structural gaps’, viz., the multitude of deficits and discriminations, that underpin their disadvantage: lack of land and productive assets, of education, skills and information, of useful social connections and the norms, beliefs and routine practices that all combine to deny them access to the livelihood opportunities that are available to others.

The idea of livelihoods (rather than jobs or occupations) is a useful one because it encompasses the multiplicity of paid activities through which households in informal economies meet immediate needs and longer-term goals together with the range of unpaid productive and reproductive work that are equally critical to these efforts, but that are socially invisible and largely the responsibility of female household members. Men across the world are expected, and expect, to play the primary breadwinning role in the family and enjoy privileged access to household resources and authority in recognition of this. Societies vary considerably in the extent to which women are expected or permitted to take part in the paid economy but across the world, they are assigned primary responsibility for unpaid reproductive tasks that contribute to the survival, health and wellbeing of the family. Women’s ability to participate in the labour market is thus held back, not only by inequalities in the division of household resources but also by their disproportionate responsibility for unpaid household work. Gender inequalities are likely to play out differently across different classes but gender generally interacts with group identity and economic status to ensure that women from poorer households are among the most disadvantaged in their societies. It is this group, and the disadvantages that shape the livelihoods they are able to pursue, that I am concerned with in this paper.

The analysis in the paper will rest on selected examples of impact assessments of social protection measures that target poor households, sometimes women within them. We can conceptualise these measures as efforts to ‘interrupt’ the course that their lives would be likely to take if the structural gaps that defined their place in society were left intact. These measures all operate with some theory of change, a set of assumptions about the nature of the disadvantages that specific sections of a population face and how they can best be tackled. Impact assessments can tell us whether theories in question were accurate in their understanding of the problem and whether they led to interventions that were appropriately designed to tackle it. They can do this by examining what happened as a result of the intervention and why it took the form it did. But not all assessments do this and indeed, many do not even set out to do this. As a result, not only do they fail to contribute to our general understanding of the social realities in which they are located but, as the rest of the paper shows, they may even fail to capture aspects of these realities that are relevant to their own objectives.

THE MID-DAY MEALS SCHEME IN INDIA: UNANTICIPATED IMPACTS

A Mid-Day Meals Scheme was first started in the state of Tamil Nadu in the 1950s. It was taken up on an ad hoc basis by a number of other states until in 2001, the Supreme Court of India directed all states to provide children in all state and state-aided primary schools with nutritious cooked meals at midday. The primary objective was to improve nutritional levels and education outcomes. Hungry children could not absorb what they were taught as they had come without breakfast and many went home for lunch and did not return. The scheme added a social equity objective – getting children from different castes to eat together and giving priority to women from *dalit* and *adivasi* households, the poorest and most socially marginalised in the country, in the recruitment of cooks.

Most evaluations of the scheme focused on its immediate objectives and were generally positive. They found that it was successful in increasing school enrolments, particularly female school enrolments, suggesting that it was addressing financial deficits and gender discriminations that led poor households to favour boys at the expense of girls when they could afford schooling [9].

Nutritional impacts were also extremely positive [10]. The findings were more uneven when it came to the equity objectives of overcoming barriers of group identity, noting the different ways in which discrimination against *dalit* children was manifested: implementation of the schemes in upper caste neighbourhood which automatically excluded children from *dalit* households; seating *dalit* children separately from others and serving them separate, often inferior, food (see, for instance, [11]).

Caste discrimination also operated in the recruitment of cooks. Jain and Shah found that in one location where *dalits* form 24 per cent of the population and where a shortage of cooks had been reported, not a single *dalit* cook had been appointed [12]. In another location, it was reported that an angry parent had thrown sand into the midday meal on finding out that it had been cooked by a *dalit* woman while elsewhere parental opposition to *dalit* cooks led to the withdrawal of children from school [13]. These shortfalls in desired impacts were a reminder of how powerful caste barriers continued to be, in this case reflecting the polluting connotations of cross-caste interactions around food.

However, there was one important, positive but unanticipated impact that was picked up in a qualitative study by Dreze and Goyal [13]. They found that when children got a hot meal in school, their mothers were freed from the responsibility of having to feed them at home in the middle of the day. This was particularly relevant for those women from socially marginalised groups who were their family's sole breadwinners and had to combine their domestic responsibilities with the need to undertake wage labour outside their home. As Sudan Mati, a 35-year old tribal woman from one of their study villages told the authors: 'Since our child has started getting food at school, we don't need to worry about him going hungry, and I don't need to come back after half a day's work to prepare his lunch' [13 p4676].

To my knowledge, this finding was not followed up in later studies to establish how widespread it was. Yet if one of the objectives of the scheme was to provide employment to women from marginalised groups, and it had not managed to do so through the anticipated mechanism, here was a finding that suggested that it had nevertheless achieved it through an unanticipated but not unexpected route: by addressing the demands on women's time imposed by their reproductive responsibilities and thereby freeing them up to invest more time in productive activities.

SOCIAL PENSIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA: MIS-CONCEPTUALIZING HOUSEHOLDS

My second example compares findings from two impact studies of the social pension programme in south Africa. It was first introduced in the early part of the 20th century to support poor white people. It was gradually extended to other sections of the poor but with racial discrimination built into amounts and procedures. These were finally eliminated in 1993 as part of the country's transition to a post-apartheid democracy. It became payable on a means-tested basis to men and women aged over 65 and 60 respectively, a condition that meant that most white people were excluded while most Africans were entitled to the maximum amount.

A study by Bertrand et al. investigated the effects of social pensions on the labour supply of working age members of pensioner households [14]. They were motivated by anecdotal evidence and newspaper articles that suggested that the pension was acting as a disincentive to work by working age adults who formed constellations around the pension recipient [14 p28]. This seemed to support the early assumptions that welfare provision in poor countries was an unproductive drain on scarce public resources.

Their study drew on a sample of three-generational households (containing at least a child, a parent and a grandparent) from a nationally representative survey carried out in 1993 to examine the labour supply of members aged 15 to 50. It found that the receipt of a pension dramatically reduced the labour supply of these members, both in terms of whether or not they worked as well as the number of hours they worked. It also found that this reduction in labour supply was much larger when the pension recipient was female rather than male and that working age men were more likely to reduce their working hours than working age women. In short, it appeared that a substantial part of the pension was being used to support unemployed adults who lived with pensioners, particularly female pensioners.

The study claimed that its findings served as a warning to policy makers not to make universalistic assumptions about household arrangements based on the experiences of wealthy industrialised countries where the elderly often lived on their own rather than in multi-generational household. Ironically, however, the findings of the study were challenged by Posel et al. on the grounds that the authors had failed to fully recognise the historical specificity of African householding arrangements in South Africa [15].

Bertrand et al. had defined the household in terms of its resident members – those who had been co-resident for more than half of the month prior to the survey – and confined their investigation to the labour supply of working-age adults who fitted this description. They failed to consider the labour supply of working-age individuals who were counted by the household as members but who had physically left in order to find work. Yet, as Posel et al. point out, this pattern of temporary or circular labour migration had been an integral feature of the South African economy for more than a century as a result of restrictions on African migration and urbanisation [15]. When these restrictions were lifted in 1993, approximately 30 percent of all rural households contained at least one prime-age labour migrant – individuals who were members of the household but who were away for a month or more during the year to ‘work or to look for work’ [15 p836]. But even after the restrictions were lifted, the dearth of employment opportunities in the countryside meant that the system of circular migration not only continued but the numbers migrating in search of work rose steadily. While men had dominated migration flows historically, and continued to make up the majority, the rise in labour migration in the 1990s had been driven by a rise in the number and proportion of rural African women of working age who had begun migrating in search of work.

Using same data and econometric procedures as Bertrand et al., Posel et al. [14, 15] showed that when household membership was extended to include non-resident household members, the negative relationship between social pensions and labour force participation disappeared. In fact, the proportion of working age rural adult members who were labour migrants was significantly greater than the proportion of resident members in employment.

They also found that although rural African women were less likely than men to migrate in search of work, when they did migrate, it was positively and significantly related to the presence of a pensioner in their household. This effect was sharply differentiated by the gender of the pensioner: it was female pension income specifically that predicted whether or not women migrated to work. Neither pension eligibility nor pension income had an effect on male labour migrant behaviour.

This suggested that working-age men were less dependent than women on the availability of a pension income in order to migrate. For women, migration was made more likely by the availability of a pension income. The fact that it was a female pension income that made a greater difference suggested that it was bridging two gender-related constraints. The first was an income constraint: working-age women could not afford the direct costs of initial migration or the financial support they needed to sustain job search through migration. The second was a time constraint: the restrictions imposed on their mobility by their responsibility for their children. A pension-receiving grandmother could not only help finance her daughter’s migration but also take over care of her grandchildren.

CONDITIONAL CASH TRANSFERS IN MEXICO: TRANSLATING WELFARE PROVISION INTO INCOME GENERATION

My third example also revolves around two assessments of the same initiative. The PROGRESA/Oportunidades programme in Mexico is a conditional cash transfer intended to promote the health and nutrition of children from poor households and targeted very explicitly to mothers as the primary carers of children.¹ Most assessments had focused on whether the transfers had achieved their child-related goals, which they largely had, but a number also explored whether they had any impacts on household livelihoods.

¹ The PROGRESA conditional cash transfer programme was renamed Oportunidades after it was extended to urban areas, hence different names are used depending on when the data was collected.

One of these by Gertler et al. concluded that it had: 18 months into the programme, households in receipt of the transfer reported a 10% increase in their agricultural income [16]. They found that households in receipt of the transfer reported a significant increase in ownership of livestock and poultry. More specifically, it was associated with an increase in the *number* of animals owned, particularly larger livestock, such as donkeys, mules, horses and oxen used for ploughing or transport, and an even larger increase in the *value* of animals, particularly smaller livestock and poultry, such as goats, sheep, cows, poultry, pigs and rabbits those whose meat and/or byproducts, such as milk, eggs or cheese were sold or consumed. The study also reported a positive impact on off-farm microentrepreneurial activity, primarily the production of handicrafts for sale. When it focused on households that had not owned any assets at the base line, the impact on number and value of animals was even larger and also included an increase in the amount of land operated.

One omission that stands out in this analysis, despite its recognition that the cash transfers were given explicitly to women in the household, was attention to the possible gendered nature of the mechanisms through which change took place – although a footnote does recognise that, in terms of household businesses, men were concentrated in carpentry and construction while women were almost exclusively responsible for all other businesses, including tailoring and the sale of food and non-food items; in other words those activities which increased after the receipt of transfer.

A rather different version of the story of change emerges in Rubalcava et al. who set out to explore whether the fact that women in the household were the direct recipients of PROGRESA transfers made a difference as to how this money was spent, over and above expenditures related to fulfilling the conditions [17]. They did this by examining the impact of income flows from the CCT separately from the impact of income from all other sources. This allowed them to separately identify the effects of a greater share of household income in the hands of women.

In terms of consumption expenditures, PROGRESA income was more likely to be allocated to children's clothing and higher quality nutrient intake than income from other sources. As far as investment was concerned, it was more likely to be spent on small livestock (pigs) and poultry (chickens and turkeys): both the likelihood of ownership and numbers owned were significantly associated with income from PROGRESA. The effect on larger animals was small and insignificant. The study notes that these were gender-differentiated impacts. It cites previous ethnographic research that showed that women were more involved than men in in small-scale subsistence livestock-rearing, such as poultry and pigs, while men were more likely to be involved in large-scale, cash-generating production, involving cattle, horses and donkeys [18 p41]. We might add that this strongly suggests that the beneficiary quoted at the beginning of Gertler et al. (whose gender was not reported) was likely to have been a woman: 'Five years ago when my oldest daughter was in school and we received money from PROGRESA , we saved 600 pesos to buy wood and the other materials for building a chicken coop, and with what was left we bought a few chickens. Since then, we have raised many chickens that we sometimes sell, and we collect 10 to 15 eggs per week that we eat ourselves' [18 p164].

One mechanism through which the differentiated use of the PROGRESA transfer may have worked was that channelling the income directly to women allowed them to treat it as their own to be spent as they wished, unlike income from other sources which was more likely to be controlled by men. This interpretation was supported by previous qualitative research cited by Rubalcava et al. [17] in which a woman in receipt of the PROGRESA transfer declared: "Now we don't demand, every moment, '*give me for shoes, give me for that.*' Now we take the money from PROGRESA and we buy from that money. Now we don't bother them [their husbands] so much" (italics in original) [19 p63].

Other evidence offered by Rubalcava et al. to [17] support this interpretation was that the PROGRESA income was not treated any differently from income from other sources in households headed by single men or single women, suggesting that it was the bargaining power effect of having an income earmarked as theirs that allowed women to assert their priorities in household with couples and explained the differential use of PROGRESA income.

Putting the findings of the two studies together, it would appear that targeting women in the household for the payment of PROGRESA transfers addressed an important structural gap in women's access to livelihood activities. It allowed them to invest in their reproductive priorities

in terms of family and children's wellbeing but it also allowed them to invest in productive assets and business activities that were under their control, contributing to household income but more specifically to income streams that they could spend according to their own priorities. At the same time, it is possible that the added income effect of PROGRESA allowed men in these households to invest in other sources of income that were under their control such as larger draft animals and, in some cases, land.

THE EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE IN INDIA: TRANSLATING INCOME GENERATION INTO CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Women's dual roles in the productive and reproductive domains of household livelihoods explains why support for their reproductive roles through PROGRESA could translate into investments associated with their productive roles. The next example reports a translation in the opposite direction, the translation of support for their productive roles into investments related to their reproductive responsibilities. India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme which became national policy in 2006 was designed with both livelihood security and gender equity in mind. It offered 100 days of employment at the minimum wage during the slack agricultural season for men and women who sought work. It instituted a minimum quota of 30% for women. The work was to be provided in close proximity to where workers lived and an on-site creche had to be provided where more than five children less than six years old were present at the site. The fact that it exceeded its gender quota in many states was evidence of the far greater unmet need for employment among women than men but may also have reflected the fact that the minimum wage they earned along with men on the scheme was higher than the wage they received in the casual agricultural wage labour market where gender gaps in wages were much higher.

Using data from the Young Lives Study in Andhra Pradesh, Afridi et al. found that an increase in participation by mothers relative to fathers was associated with the amount of time their children spent in school [20]. This impact was over and above any income effect associated with participation in the NREGS. An increase in fathers' participation, by contrast, had a negative and significant effect on children's education. A more disaggregated analysis suggested that the impact of mothers' participation on school attendance was confined to girls and for the younger age groups; it was insignificant for boy and older children. It was also larger among asset-poor household. The impact of fathers' participation was insignificant for girls but significant and negative for boys and older children. Mothers' participation also had a positive impact on grade attainment, particularly for girls in poorer households while fathers' participation had little impact on grades.

The study used the survey data at its disposal to investigate causal mechanisms suggested by bargaining theory might provide the explanation. Examining the pattern of decision-making and control over income from various sources reported in their survey, it found that labour force participation by mothers significantly increased the probability that they had greater say in the utilisation of their own earnings. So the study was able to conclude that women's access to an income of their own, particularly in income-constrained households, increased their bargaining power, allowing them to invest their income in priorities that were different from those of men. But it could have taken a step further and asked why the fathers' participation in the NREGS appeared to have adverse impacts on children's education: it did not simply leave schooling outcomes unchanged, but actually led to a decline in school attendance, especially among boys. Understanding why this was the case would have helped us understand better how addressing the gendered structural gap in livelihood opportunities was likely to play out in children's lives but this would have required stepping outside the data available in the survey and turning to qualitative methods.

MULTI-STRANDED ASSET TRANSFER PROGRAMMES IN WEST BENGAL AND PAKISTAN

I want to now turn to another set of social protection efforts to promote the livelihoods of the poor, this time targeted explicitly to women. The approach in question was a multi-stranded asset transfer programme that had been pioneered by BRAC in Bangladesh in order to graduate

women from ultra-poor households out of extreme poverty within a period of two years to a level that they would be able to participate in programmes aimed at the poor in general. The story of change that informed BRAC's Targeting the Ultra Poor programme reflected its analysis of the multiple and overlapping constraints that kept these women and their households in extreme poverty. These households were very often female-headed, earned low and precarious livelihoods through the sale of unskilled physical labour, never earned enough to save or invest and frequently found themselves in debt as a result of various crises, most often health related. The programme objective was to assist these households to climb out of extreme poverty within a period of two years by providing them with a combination of transfers of small assets, a monthly consumption stipend, health support, a savings mechanism and regular training and mentoring to build their skills and confidence.

The effectiveness of the programme in Bangladesh led to the setting up of the Graduation programme by Ford Foundation and Mastercard. This funded efforts to pilot the approach in different countries, mainly by local NGOs. It also brought in a team of researchers to carry out impact assessments of the pilots. While the main team was made up of quantitative researchers who carried out randomised control trials, the Graduation programme also brought in a team of qualitative researchers, including myself, to assess pilots being carried out in Sindh, Pakistan and West Bengal, India. There was considerable overlap in terms of timing and location between the RCTs and the qualitative assessments, but they were carried out on different pilots in different locations and in parallel to, rather than in combination with, each other. The stories of change that these studies were able to narrate thus lacked the richness and depth that might have been possible had the approaches been combined but there are, nevertheless, insights to be gleaned from 'reading' the studies together (see Kabeer [21] for a detailed description of these two sets of impact assessments).

The RCTs, by design, were involved in the pilots from their inception, determining the selection of the treatment and control households, carrying out base line surveys and then, after a period of time, one or more end line survey. The RCTs in both West Bengal and Sindh were entirely quantitative, basing their findings on what their survey data could tell them and investigating a very similar and predetermined set of impacts. This was to allow comparison across the different RCT studies [22].

Our qualitative assessments began some time towards the end of our two pilots. In each context we asked project staff to select 20 participants, half of whom they considered to be on their way to climbing out of extreme poverty, and half who they classified as 'slow', unlikely to have improved their condition a great deal by the end of the project. A member of our research team lived in close proximity to the study area and visited these women and their families every two months for over a year to discuss how they were progressing and their views about the role of the programme. They also engaged project staff in discussions of their views about the varying progress made by the participants. In the final interview, women were asked to assess their own progress by ranking themselves on a livelihood ladder: where had they been at the start of the project, where were they now and where did they hope to be in the future. While their rankings were clearly subjective and interpersonal comparisons were out of the question, their responses provided a 'hook' around which their own experiences of the project could be organized. I want to use these different approaches to impact assessment to continue my discussion about impact assessment as a methodology for the study of social change.

SINDH, PAKISTAN: MISUNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY

A number of RCT pilots were implemented in different parts of Sindh Province by different organizations. It was clear that some of these organizations were not familiar with the randomization techniques required by RCTs and made their own decisions about which households to include rather than following the lottery method intended to ensure the random assignment of households to treatment and control groups. As a result, there was no guarantee that households in the control group and treatment were similar in terms of relevant characteristics and, in fact, only 10% of the treatment group were found to be below the poverty line.

The RCT impact assessments were carried out two and three years after the end of the project. The only impacts that lasted for the three years after the project were asset holdings, mainly made up of the livestock that had been transferred to the households; per capita expenditure, reflecting higher income generated by their livestock; and 'political involvement' in the form of membership of a village committee. Given the restrictions on women's public mobility in the region, the significance of this last finding would have been greater had we been told whether it was women rather than men who joined these committees. The evidence relating to other anticipated impacts were either short-term or non-existent. The study did not provide any explanation for the weakness of the impacts reported. And given the flawed randomisation process, it is not clear whether the absence of lasting impact reflected the mismatch between the programme design and local conditions or the failure to control for selection biases.

Our qualitative study was assigned the pilot managed by the Orangi Charitable Trust. It became quickly evident through our interviews that this was not an organization that was very familiar with rural poverty. In fact, its main experience had been in the provision of microfinance to male entrepreneurs in urban areas. As we found out, the selection of households for participation in the pilot had been made on the basis on consultation with influential figures in different communities and visits by project staff to ascertain their conditions for themselves.

The problem was that rural communities in the project area, as elsewhere in Sindh, were organized around close-knit networks of households belonging to the same patrilineage groups, the *biraderi*, and living together in the same hamlets. They were thus socially homogenous communities even if some of the families within them might be poorer than others. It was evident that the 'influential figures' consulted by project staff were the senior patriarchs in these kinship groups who had selected households on the basis of relations of proximity or loyalty rather than their economic conditions and had advised them to conceal their assets when they were initially visited by project staff. As a result, the participating households varied considerably from each. Some of the affluent members of these patrilineage groups owned fertile land, were already engaged in cultivation and livestock rearing while others from the same group had little or no land and worked as wage labourers or sharecroppers for local landlords.

The findings from our qualitative study were fairly predictable and in line with findings reported from other impact assessments of the Graduation programme: households that started out with more favourable initial positions fared far better than those that started out from positions of disadvantage. Given the severe restrictions on women's public mobility and labour market opportunities, favourable initial conditions almost invariably included having one or more able-bodied adult males in the household who could either use the assets provided by the project or else support women in their efforts to profit from them. These were the women who had been ranked as 'fast climbers' by project staff and who also saw themselves having climbed up the livelihood ladder during the project.

Among those who performed poorly by their own as well as staff criteria, the absence of at least one adult male was often a factor but so too were episodes of ill health in the family as well as responsibility for elderly dependents. It was evident that a number of these women did not believe that the project could bridge the structural gaps that restricted their access to the labour market, including norms of female seclusion and primary responsibility for childcare and domestic chores. They believed that project should have prioritised assistance to men who made better use of what the project had to offer. However, there was one woman from this group who had experienced a change in her life that was likely to elude impact assessments based on predetermined quantitative indicators. She was classified as a slow climber by the project as she was not seen to have made profitable use of her transfers. She herself believed she had climbed up to the next rung of the ladder but through her own efforts rather than support from the project. Nevertheless, she credited the project with an important lesson: it had alerted to the existence of a ladder: 'Now my attitude has completely changed. Now I believe that if one gets good support, even once, one can change one's situation'. So the project had succeeded in implanting a new 'capacity to aspire' in at least one of the 20 women in our study, someone who had previously been resigned to a lifetime of poverty.

The implementing agency for the RCT pilot in the state of West Bengal was Bandhan, a well-established microfinance organization with a national presence. It followed the randomisation protocol faithfully but around half of those selected to participate returned their assets and refused to participate any further. This was not a random outcome. Unlike the Sindh context, the West Bengal population is not socially homogenous; households in extreme poverty were generally located at the intersection of extreme material disadvantage and socially marginalised group identities – most often Muslims, the largest religious minority, who made up 27% of the state's population, *dalits*, who made up 24%, and *adivasi* (indigenous) groups who made up just 5% and were also the very poorest. Those who returned their assets were disproportionately drawn from Muslim households and the reasons given related to the suspicion that Bandhan was seeking to convert them to Christianity. As a result, those who *did* participate in the pilot were significantly more likely to be Hindu, but their caste was not mentioned.

The RCT impact assessment allowed for these dropouts by estimating impacts across all those who the project had 'intended-to-treat' rather than only those who had actually participated. This weakened the size of the impacts but a number of impacts were nevertheless significant and persisted for at least 30 months after the transfer. These included per capita consumption, assets, food security, financial inclusion, labour supply and income. There was no impact on women's decision-making role or mental health, the impact on political involvement materialised in the long term while the impact on physical health was short term. The study does not offer any explanation why the anticipated impacts did not materialise or were only short-term.

The estimation of quantile treatment effects to capture the distribution impacts found that consumption, asset and income impacts increased sharply across quantiles for each round of assessment. In other words, it was the better off who prospered most. But the study did not provide any information on the *social* distribution of the impacts. Presumably it was largely Hindu households who benefited, but what caste were they and how did the Muslims who opted to remain in the treatment group fare as a result of the transfers? Given the socially stratified nature of extreme poverty in this context, such information is relevant for understanding the kinds of social change that interventions like this can bring about.

Turning to our qualitative assessment, the implementing agency for the pilot selected for the qualitative research was Trickle-Up, an international NGO experienced in the promotion of self-help groups around the world and who partnered in West Bengal with a local NGO. A number of Trickle Up staff in West Bengal had previously worked with another Indian NGO with long experience in the self-help group approach. Because Trickle-Up's objective was building the savings and organisational capacity of poor women, it was not focused on the disbursement and repayment of loans and consequently had a more relaxed relationship with their participants than most microfinance organisations. Our interviews revealed that several of the participants had been suspicious of the programme initially, unclear as to the motivations of an unknown organisations apparently offering them something for nothing. The consultations carried out by programme staff to explain their objectives appear to have had allayed their suspicions. None refused to participate – but they did have to deal with the jealousy of slightly better off neighbours who had not been included in the programme.

Both the assessments of the project staff as well as the self-assessments of the different participants and how they explained their rankings on the livelihood ladder led us to the conclusion that it was the *adivasi* participants, the poorest and most marginalised social group in the population who appeared to benefit most from the pilot. This was in contrast to most other TUP pilots which had concluded that where benefits were reported, it had been those who started out with the most favourable initial conditions who benefited most. Detailed discussions over the course of the study suggested that the past history of this group had a role to play in explaining their progress. Numerically insignificant, they did not represent a vote bank for political parties – unlike Muslims who made up a larger minority in West Bengal than most other Indian states. *Adivasis* lived in the most poorly served villages in West Bengal and had been bypassed by all development interventions in the past.

This was the first time they had been approached by a development organisation and they were determined to make the most of the opportunity, faithfully following the advice they

were given when it appeared relevant, exercising their own initiative when it did not. Moreover, most of them had been working since childhood; the kinds of social restrictions that some of the Muslim women in our study were subject to did not apply to them. They were able to take advantage of project advice and support regardless of whether they had adult males in the house, although having a co-operative adult male did increase their chances of prospering.

In 2017, I returned with Sanchari Datta, the researcher who had carried out our field interviews in 2011, to find out how these 20 participants had fared over time [23]. This visit brought home to us some of the limitations of relying on purely qualitative interviews to gain insights into longer term impacts. While in the earlier study, we were able to do a form of 'process-tracing' in 'real time' to follow exactly how participants were using programme support and what explained their progress, or lack of it, we could not carry out the same approach seven years later. Participants had problems of recall in thinking back on how they had fared since we had last spoken to them, with some accounts far hazier than others. Even for those with better memories, the problem of disentangling project-related changes from other changes in their lives was near-impossible. Any attempt at attribution was further complicated by major changes in the wider context, including changes in the regime in power. In retrospect, including a small 'control' group in our qualitative study design would have been advisable if we had planned to explore longer term impacts.

CONCLUSION

Impact assessments are studies of intended social change, of efforts to interrupt the less desirable course of events that would have occurred in their absence. They can tell us a great deal about the dynamics of social change in societies that remain under-researched but only if that intention is built into their methodology. A narrow input-output-outcome approach that relies on purely quantitative data may tell us if an intervention worked but will not be able to explain why and how it worked and even less able to explain cases where it did not work. The assessments selected for discussion in this paper suggest that the explanatory power of assessment studies could be considerably improved through taking certain aspects of methodology more seriously.

One is the need to know the history and context of the intervention in question. Knowledge of the history of economic migration in South Africa allowed Posel et al. [15] to offer a more empirically grounded understanding of African household that challenged the 'dependency effect' of social pensions suggested by Bertrand et al. [14]. Knowledge of the history of neglect of the *adivasi* community in West Bengal helped us to make sense of our counter-intuitive finding that, despite their greater poverty and social marginalization, they benefited most from the Graduation programme.

Context also matters, highlighting the nature of the structural gaps faced by women in different parts of the world. In India, providing children from marginalized households with a mid-day meal reduced the constraints imposed on their working mothers by their reproductive responsibilities. Our assessment of the Graduation programme in West Bengal noted that stricter norms of female seclusion curtailed the ability of women from Muslim households to take up programme opportunities to a far greater extent than women from *dalit* and *adivasi* households. In Pakistan, where these constraints were particularly severe, a number of programme participants had expressed the view that the transfers should have targeted men. In Mexico, a contextual understanding of the gender division of assets, activities and responsibilities made it clear that conditional transfers targeted to women led to a very different pattern of investment and consumption than those where income sources were largely controlled by men.

The other important methodological recommendation is to use different methods of data collection because different methods can together yield a more complete picture of complex realities. Quantitative data are useful in helping to quantify which of the anticipated impacts of an intervention materialised and how they were distributed among programme participants. But a great deal of what goes on between the design of an intervention, its implementation in the field and the impacts it achieves is best researched through various kinds of qualitative data – policy documents, interviews with policy actors, programme

officials and programme recipients along with analysis of previous studies carried out in particular locations can all help to improve our understanding of how a programme fared once it moved from the ideas that informed its story of change into the practical challenges of implementation in the real world.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Naila Kabeer  orcid.org/0000-0001-7769-9540

Department of International Development/International Inequalities Institute, London School of Economics, UK

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