

Chris Roche. *Social Impact Assessment for Development Agencies: Learning to Value Change*. UK: Oxfam, 1999. £ 9.95. 308 pages.

Chris Roche defines impact assessment as “the systematic analysis of the lasting or significant changes—positive or negative, intended or not—in people’s lives brought about by a given action or series of actions” (p. 21). Consequently, the book intends to provide guidelines for ex-post assessments of the “impacts” development or other social sector projects have had on people’s lives.

The reader learns about the various social impact assessment approaches and methods mainly through 11 case studies, which form the backbone of the book. These social impact assessments were carried out for ten development projects in developing countries—five of these are located in South Asia, including Pakistan—, and one social sector project in Europe. These projects vary considerably in scale, objectives, and the target group they purport to work for; and they were at different stages of the project cycle at the time the impact assessment was undertaken.

The book comprises eight chapters. Chapter 1 presents a brief overview of the 11 case studies; and in Chapter 2 Chris Roche discusses his understanding of and approach to social impact assessment. From the very outset he emphasises that the perceptions of those a project aims to help, and those—positively and negatively—affected people who were initially not intended to benefit, are crucial during all stages of social impact assessment. Thus, the assessment of changes in people’s lives must take account of *their* values, priorities, and judgements. Chris Roche repudiates the scientific objectivity and representativity of social science research that is often claimed by statistically oriented quantitative researchers. Instead, he stresses that social impact assessments—for instance, the interpretation of what has happened and what will happen in the future—are in the last instance based on judgements, regardless of the research methods and tools being used. With this approach the book is strongly anchored in the tradition of grounded theory; subsequently, the need to assess the impact by looking through the eyes of those “who are impacted” is a concern that resurfaces frequently in the succeeding chapters.

Chapters 3 and 4 form the centrepiece of the book. In Chapter 3, which focuses on the planning and designing of social impact assessments, the author critically discusses how changes in poverty and wellbeing—the ultimate objective of all projects that underwent social impact assessments—were defined in the case studies; the different approaches that were used to determine the arenas or kinds of impacts to be assessed; the different ways indicators were established; and the various degrees of stakeholder participation that were promoted during the social impact assessment processes. The chapter also contains detailed elaborations on sampling techniques, innovative approaches to collect baseline data with relatively little effort and to reconstruct baseline data where none are available, how to involve stakeholders in all stages of impact assessments, and how to deal with attribution of identified change.

Chapter 4 introduces tools, methods and approaches for conducting social impact assessments. In the light of the experiences of the case studies with various qualitative and quantitative research tools, and the problems encountered, the chapter analyses the advantages and disadvantages of surveys, interviews, discussions, observations, workshops, and case studies for conducting social impact assessments. A section on Rapid Rural Appraisals/Participatory Rural Appraisals demonstrates how qualitative research data can be transformed into time lines, venn diagrams, impact flow charts, and trend analyses; and how such graphical presentation of results enables comparisons between projects, project components, different types of stakeholders, etc.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore ways to assess the impact in two specific, particularly challenging areas, namely, emergency situations and advocacy work. Chapter 7 discusses how to determine the influence, roles and relationships of the organisations and institutions involved in a given programme or region. Emphasis is placed on the recognition that organisations have their own cultures, systems and values. These are products of the society in which the organisations exist, and the organisations reproduce them in turn. Therefore, organisations, apart from delivering projects, can produce various forms of inequality; and they set the context in which projects evolve and determine the impact they achieve. Chapter 8 presents a brief review of the book in which key issues that have been extracted from the preceding chapters are once again reflected upon.

Chapters 5, 6 and partly Chapter 7 pick up many of the issues raised in Chapters 3 and 4 already and discuss them again in the context of their respective fields of analysis. Therefore, the reader encounters many redundant passages that make the second half of the book somewhat long-winded. Furthermore, several of the articles/books the author refers to, and which interested readers might want to further probe into, are not listed in the bibliography. Yet, despite these shortcomings the book excels in many regards. The case studies that form the framework of the author's analyses and discussions make the book illustrative lively, and easily understandable. A list of the social impact assessment reports available on the 11 projects, and addresses of the latter are given in the annex of the book. They enable readers to obtain more comprehensive information about the projects and the social impact assessments that were carried out.

The author does not endeavour to present a blueprint for conducting social impact assessments but extracts certain generic issues from the case studies that in all social impact assessments are crucial for obtaining valid results. These include the need to involve as many stakeholders as possible in all stages of the social impact assessment process taking into consideration criteria such as gender, race or ethnic origin, socio-economic status, etc.; the importance of the context for developing indicators and the need to be open to new and emerging indicators thorough cross-checking of results; and the presentation of disaggregated data where opinions diverge between different types of stakeholders.

Chris Roche has unnecessarily narrowed down the readership of his book by drawing a clear line between social impact assessment on the one hand, and monitoring and evaluation on the other hand (for him, social impact assessment occurs less frequently and is more analytical than monitoring and evaluation; and contrary to M&E, social impact assessment is mainly concerned with longer-term outcomes and also considers external influences and events). Yet, many of the issues raised in his book will also prove relevant and valuable for those involved in monitoring and evaluation of development or other social projects, or in social science research in the context of developing countries at large.

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