**Reflection Paper 1**

**Example of a research that I participated:**

Throughout my professional career, I had the opportunity to participate in several research projects. Some of those I participated as one of the members of the research team and in some cases I led the process as a team leader. Today I am going to share my experience from one research initiative that I was recently involved as a team leader and was responsible for ensuring the quality throughout the process i.e starting from design, implementation (data collection on the ground) analysis, interpretation and dissemination of findings among the key stakeholders. . It was an impact evaluation initiated and commissioned by Heifer International Peru and conducted in May 2013. The objective was to assess the impact of a set of food security and livelihood projects on “the process and outcome of women’s empowerment”

**Brief description of the projects under evaluation:**

***Background:*** Heifer Peru is an international development organization that contributes to ending poverty and hunger, protecting degradation of the environment and securing sustainable livelihoods for the poor small holder farmers living in rural areas of Peru. In the recent past Heifer Peru has identified, “Women’s empowerment” as a key multiplier in securing sustainable livelihoods and agreed on 3 key outcomes of women’s empowerment to be measured in each of its project. These 3 outcomes are: 1. Increased leadership roles, 2. Access to and control over income and assets, 3. Participation in decision making at household and community levels. Heifer Peru intends to achieve these outcomes through a set of key interventions: 1. Women group formation 2. Prioritize women’s membership in selection criteria 3. Focus on livestock species and other inputs appropriate for women’s needs 4. Design projects with gender lens, and specific focus on socio-economic benefits for women.

For the last 5 years Heifer Peru had been implementing several umbrella projects in the north, central and southern regions of the country. The overall goal of all these projects is “to secure sustainable livelihoods and improve well being of project beneficiaries”. Heifer puts women at the centre of all its project and applies a common community development approach known as VBHCD (Value based holistic community development approach) to empower project beneficiaries (primarily women) and their communities across all Heifer projects. In May 2013, Heifer Peru decided to conduct an impact evaluation of 3 similar on-going projects to assess the impact of these projects on “women empowerment”. Following are the 3 projects that had been included in the evaluation:

* *Building Sustainable Ways of Life in Piura's Dry Forest Communities (Piura region of Peru)*
* Alpaca biodiversity in high Andean communities (Cusco region of Peru)
* Food Security Enhancement and Entrepreneurial Development (Puno region of Peru)

These 3 projects had been implemented in two southern (cusco and puno) and one central district of Peru in Latin America. The primary target groups of these projects were poor small holder farmers (alpaca growers) mostly women and their family members living in the remote villages central and southern villages of Peru.

***Goal and Objectives:*** All these 3 projects had a common goal which is “securing sustainable livelihood for poor small holder alpaca grower[[1]](#footnote-1)” with a set of outcomes to be achieved:

1. Enhanced food security,
2. increased income & nutrition,
3. improved agro-ecological practices to combat climate change,
4. improved alpaca biodiversity, improved animal management techniques,
5. improved local policy and
6. women’s group development and training.

However, it is worth mentioning here that all those projects were designed before Heifer took the decision of making “women empowerment” as a central component of each of its project. Therefore, none of these projects has set women empowerment either as a goal or as an objective. However Since women are at centre of all Heifer’s work, Heifer strongly believes that this VBHCD also has a direct impact on empowering women. Therefore, Heifer wanted to see whether, how or to what extent Heifer’s VBCHD approach had contributed on women empowerment in Peru.

***Major interventions:*** The projects under evaluation had five major interventions (a) Formation of self help groups involving 15 to 20 poor women small holder farmers/producers (b) providing inputs and skill training on producing, processing and marketing alpaca fibers (a kind of wool produced from an animal like sheep, and one of the major source of income for poor peruvion living in the andes region) as a means of income generation for their family (c) Linking them with local markets, input sellers and buyers (d) Providing education on health, hygiene and nutrition to improve child feeding and caring behavior (e) providing inputs and support to establish low cost hygienic stove.

Even though women empowerment was not mentioned as an explicit outcome in any of these 3 projects, Heifer believes that because of its direct work with women and VBHCD approach “*each Heifer’s project has a direct or indirect impact on, promoting women’s empowerment and gender equity in the community and thus creates a more conducive environment for sustainable development”*.

With this belief, Heifer decided to conduct an impact evaluation to see whether or to what extent these 3 above mentioned projects had an impact on empowering women and their communities in the project areas.

**Evaluation objectives:**

1. To assess the impact of 3 similar food security and livelihood projects and Heifer value-based holistic community development (VBHCD) approach on empowering women and promoting gender equity in remote rural communities of Peru.
2. To provide an evidence-based lesson learned/best practices document that details the “how” as to Heifer Peru’s approach and expertise in its work with women and gender issues.

**Study design and methods:** To conduct this women empowerment impact evaluation, we formed a 5 members study team; one team leader, one coordinator, two research assistants and one local consultant. Though it was an internal evaluation, a local consultant was hired mainly because of her knowledge on the context, language ability (she speaks both Spanish and English) technical expertise and experiences in conducting research on women empowerment.

A qualitative research design was applied and the study team used a range of qualitative tools and methods to collect, analyse and interpret research findings. Prior to the primary data collection using qualitative tools and methods, the research team collected and studied all the relevant project documents, such as project proposals, previous project monitoring and evaluation reports and any other documents that had information regarding the project as well as the context.

For primary data collection we identified a list of key stakeholders that included the direct beneficiaries/ primary target groups (in this case poor women small holder farmers/alpaca growers), their husbands, community leaders/elites, and representatives from local administrative bodies such as mayor. We conducted series of FGDs, Key informant interviews, group discussions, and observations. Clear objectives and separate FGD checklist and interview questionnaires were developed for different stakeholder groups. All the interviews, FGDs were conducted in Spanish and were translated by two interpreters. Data were analysed and interpreted using range of qualitative tools such as, sorting, piling and ranking.

***Who initiated the project and why?***

The evaluation was initiated by Heifer Peru, who was both the donor as well as the implementer of those projects. These projects were chosen for the impact evaluation because they represented the three largest projects in Heifer Peru’s project portfolio. While the specific interventions and target groups assisted for each project were slightly different, targeting women as the primary beneficiaries, organizing them into groups, providing technical as well as leadership training on producing, processing and marketing alpaca, promoting resource sharing within the households, and women participation in the decision making process at the family and organizational level remained consistent in each of these 3 projects.

Therefore, the goal of choosing these three different types of projects was to underscore the concept that women’s empowerment is not an accidental outcome or impact; but that it has to be intentionally woven into the design and implementation of each project from the beginning, and only then positive changes for individuals, families and organizations and a more sustainable development environment can be expected.

***Who benefitted from this process?***

Since the primary stakeholder of that research was “Heifer Peru and Heifer International” they are the ones who benefitted most from this evaluation. The research (impact evaluation) was designed mainly to satisfy the information need of Heifer. However the information need of the broader audience (such as like minded organizations, donor communities, civil society and other development organizations) has also been taken into consideration so that findings and knowledge generated through this research could be shared with them for mutual learning, reflection and development of similar projects in future.

The second groups of stakeholders who were benefitted from this process were the women and community members who participated in one to one interview, FGDs and group discussion. Though the study was not designed in consultation with beneficiaries, the process of the data collection was empowering for them particularly for the poor rural women who felt honoured and empowered when they were asked to share their views and opinion on both the process as well as the impact (both positive and negative) of the project on their lives and on the community as a whole.

The study team was also being benefitted a lot by the process because it opened up a window of opportunity for them to learn

1. how changes happen in this type of very remote rural indigenous communities
2. what are the key challenges of theoretical design and practical implementation of a project
3. What are the major challenges of conducting an impact assessment particularly for a complex concept like “women empowerment”
4. How to synthesize and analyze the findings to generate knowledge that is easily understandable and usable by various stakeholders

***In what ways, and how much control did you have over this process and the knowledge generated through it?***

As I mentioned at the beginning that I was responsible for leading the whole process of evaluation, and therefore I had substantial control on ensuring the quality and design of the study. However, that does not necessarily mean that I have absolute control over the entire process and/or the knowledge that was generated through this process. Mainly because (a) I wanted the process to be as participatory as possible and respected the view of each team members in designing the study as well as analyzing the findings (b) This 5 members core team consulted a wide range of stakeholders (mainly implementers) to finalize the design of the study, and during that process we had to revise and compromise some of the tools and methods to comply with local context and ethical issues (c) finally even though we (study team) developed and agreed to a rigorous method and set of tools, not all of those tools and methods were applied exactly as they were supposed to be, some of those were distorted during the process of implementation. Therefore, I cannot say with full confidence that the data and/or the knowledge generated through this process is the 100% true reflection of the real impact of the project or what the beneficiaries think about the impact of the project.

***What are some strengths and weaknesses of the process you have described?***

While the study process had some strength it also had lots of challenges and weaknesses as described below:

Strengths:

1. Composition of the study team: It was a very good combination of people with different skill set and people who are external and internal to the project. Three members of the study team including me were external to project meaning did not have any involvement in the project prior to the evaluation. The other two members were involved in supervising and implementation of the project at various stages and thereby helped the study team in sharing the history, the background and the context in which the projects were implemented. All those information was very useful in designing the study.
2. Freedom of the study team: Since it was an internal evaluation and the main objective of the study was to learn, there was less pressure to please any particular group/s which is often the case if the evaluation is done to satisfy the donor. The study team enjoyed absolute freedom and authority to design and implement the study in a way that they think is the most rigorus and effective to capture learning. There was less pressure to show only positive impact and therefore neither the design nor the analysis was influenced by the higher authority, policy makers or management team
3. The study itself was a very good learning process for the study team and the knowledge generated through this process was regarded as highly beneficial for the organization.

There were several weaknesses of the study that also contributed to our learning:

1. As mentioned earlier that “women empowerment” was not the goal neither an objective of the project, and therefore the project was never designed, implemented or evaluated proactively through the lens of women empowerment. That was a fundamental design issue and because of that gap in the design, it was very hard to find any meaningful data from the past that could be used to compare the status of women empowerment at the present with their status in the past. The study team had to struggle to re-create the baseline against which the changes in their status could be compared.
2. Lack of counter-factual/comparison groups. Even though the study team was able to detect some changes in the lives of women and of their empowerment as per their definition of empowerment, there was no way to say whether these change have happened because of their involvement in the project or that was a general trend meaning that the change would have happened anyway with or without the project interventions.
3. The variation of knowledge and understanding about the central topic of the evaluation in this case “women empowerment”. “Women empowerment” is a very complex concept and there are many different schools of thoughts and frameworks are available to define and measure empowerment. We had to spend quite a bit of time to discuss and agreed on Heifer define women empowerment, is it a process or a outcome or both? How to measure empowerment? What an impact assessment on women empowerment should look like? What are some of the best tools… etc. So, finally even though we agreed on some key characteristics and a common framework to be followed to design and conduct the study, the actual implementation of the study was influenced by individual team member’s understanding and belief on the process and outcome of empowerment.
4. Even though we had a rigorous study design, we had very limited time to train the extended study team members (the field organizer, the interviewers, the interpreters, the logistics etc) and that had a direct impact on the quality of the implementation and the participation of the wider groups, particularly beneficiaries in the process. Just to site one example, because of limited understanding about the objective of the study and the time constraints, the field organizer only invited people/beneficiaries to interview who were available within short notice, who lives close to vicinity of the Heifer office, and/or who are more vocal than others. So, it is obvious that the process was affected by the selection bias and we may have excluded a group who might have a different experience from the project. Secondly since there was no participation of the beneficiaries or the community members in the selection process, we don’t know whether we talked to the right people for gathering information or sharing views.
5. The language was a big barrier, for two of us we had to rely completely on the interpreter, so we don’t how much of those translations carried the true meaning of beneficiaries view.
6. Finally a vast majority of the result was complied and analyzed by the consultant, who had her own way of understanding and belief about what it means by empowerment and how it happens. Her report was heavily influenced by her personal belief and interpretation which differed quite a lot from what we observed in the field. So the learning here is that hiring appropriate consultant is crucial to get the neutral knowledge and learning.

***Given what you have learned about PR, how would*** ***you describe the quality and levels of participation of yourself and others in this process?***

In terms of participation, I can say that my participation in the process was substantial, but could have been better if I would speak Spanish and had more knowledge about the context before the study. In terms of participation of others particularly beneficiaries was not sufficient. The beneficiaries only participated in responding some questions or some discussions that was initiated by the researcher; they did not take part in the design of study or the analysis of the findings. So we can say that it was more of a passive participation than active and therefore the study cannot be claimed as true participatory research. The participation of the broader community members was limited; mainly because of time constraint and limited resources we concentrated our consultation only with few formal and informal community leaders. To conclude I will say that if time and resources permitted, we could have improved the quality and range of participation in this process.

***How do you suppose the process and outcomes might have changed had it been done in a more (or less) participatory manner?***The process and outcomes of the evaluation could have been improved a lot, if we could ensure much wider participation by all the relevant stakeholders such as traditional community leaders, market actors (buyers, traders, wholesalers, middleman,) service providing institutions/organizations particularly financial services, local level political leaders etc. Through wider participation we might have captured more diverse perspective and opinion on the impact of the project on women empowerment. The diversity of opinion also would give us wider opportunity to do the analysis from different dimensions and come up with a more comprehensive and useful conclusion and recommendations that are authentic and replicable by others to tackle similar kind of problems.

1. Alpaca is a kind of animal that produce meat, milk and fibre a kind of wool. Alpaca fibre and product made of this fibre can be a high value commodity if quality is maintained during production and processing. Alpaca is the main source of income for many poor farmers living in Andean regions of Peru. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)