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THE IMPACT OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS ON BENEFICIARY LIVING CONDITIONS: MEASURING CONCRETE IMPROVEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The ultimate purpose of socio-economic development projects is to improve the living conditions of beneficiaries. However, measuring this impact is methodologically challenging, and many projects are evaluated based on outputs rather than outcomes. This article tests the hypothesis that concrete improvement in beneficiary living conditions testifies to project success and efficacy. Drawing on the impact evaluation literature, the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria, and the capability approach, the study employs a mixed-method design combining document analysis, semi-

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structured interviews, and beneficiary surveys across fifteen dioceses of the Church-Family of God in Burkina Faso. The research operationalizes living conditions through multiple dimensions, including income, employment, access to basic services, health, education, food security, and social capital. The findings reveal that concrete improvement in beneficiary living conditions is a valid indicator of project success, but that measuring this improvement requires attention to several methodological challenges, including the attribution problem, the selection problem, the timing of measurement, and the heterogeneity of impacts across beneficiary groups. The study identifies four pathways through which projects improve living conditions: direct provision of goods and services, income generation, capacity building, and social mobilization. It also identifies factors that mediate the relationship between project activities and living condition improvements, including the quality of project implementation, the enabling environment, and beneficiary characteristics. The article proposes a mixed-method approach to impact measurement that combines quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and participatory methods. It concludes that while output-based evaluation is easier and cheaper, outcome-based and impact-based evaluation is essential for ensuring that projects are actually improving the lives of the poor and vulnerable.

Keywords: Project impact, living conditions, beneficiary outcomes, impact evaluation, Burkina Faso, capability approach.

RÉSUMÉ

Le but ultime des projets de développement socio-économique est d'améliorer les conditions de vie des bénéficiaires. Cependant, mesurer cet impact est méthodologiquement difficile, et de nombreux projets sont évalués sur la base des extrants plutôt que des résultats. Cet article teste l'hypothèse selon laquelle l'amélioration concrète des conditions de vie des bénéficiaires témoigne du succès et de l'efficacité des projets. S'appuyant sur la littérature sur l'évaluation d'impact, les critères d'évaluation de l'OCDE/CAD et l'approche par les capacités, l'étude emploie une méthodologie mixte combinant l'analyse documentaire, des entretiens semi-directifs et des enquêtes auprès des bénéficiaires dans quinze diocèses de l'Église-Famille de Dieu au Burkina Faso. La recherche opérationnalise les conditions de vie à travers de multiples dimensions, y compris le revenu, l'emploi, l'accès aux services de base, la santé, l'éducation, la sécurité alimentaire et le capital social. Les résultats révèlent que l'amélioration concrète des conditions de

vie des bénéficiaires est un indicateur valide du succès des projets, mais que la mesure de cette amélioration nécessite une attention particulière à plusieurs défis méthodologiques, notamment le problème d'attribution, le problème de sélection, le moment de la mesure et l'hétérogénéité des impacts entre les groupes de bénéficiaires. L'étude identifie quatre voies par lesquelles les projets améliorent les conditions de vie : la fourniture directe de biens et services, la génération de revenus, le renforcement des capacités et la mobilisation sociale. Elle identifie également les facteurs qui médiatisent la relation entre les activités du projet et les améliorations des conditions de vie, y compris la qualité de la mise en œuvre du projet, l'environnement favorable et les caractéristiques des bénéficiaires. L'article propose une approche mixte pour la mesure d'impact qui combine des enquêtes quantitatives, des entretiens qualitatifs et des méthodes participatives. Il conclut que, bien que l'évaluation basée sur les extrants soit plus facile et moins coûteuse, l'évaluation basée sur les résultats et l'impact est essentielle pour garantir que les projets améliorent réellement la vie des pauvres et des vulnérables.

Mots-clés : Impact des projets, conditions de vie, résultats pour les bénéficiaires, évaluation d'impact, Burkina Faso, approche par les capacités.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ultimate purpose of socio-economic development projects is to improve the living conditions of beneficiaries. Whether a project builds a school, drills a borehole, or provides microcredit, the justification for the investment is that it will make people's lives better. Yet, measuring this impact is methodologically challenging, and many projects are evaluated based on outputs rather than outcomes. A project may report that it has constructed twenty classrooms, but that output does not tell us whether children's learning outcomes have improved. A project may report that it has

distributed ten thousand mosquito nets, but that output does not tell us whether malaria incidence has declined.

This article tests a specific hypothesis derived from the development evaluation literature: that concrete improvement in beneficiary living conditions testifies to project success and efficacy. This hypothesis is foundational to results-based management and to the logical framework approach. If the hypothesis is correct, then evaluators can assess project success by measuring changes in beneficiary living conditions before and after the project. If the hypothesis is incorrect, or only partially correct, then more complex approaches to impact measurement are required.

The research is situated within the context of the Church-Family of God in Burkina Faso, a Catholic institution that has implemented socio-economic development projects across fifteen dioceses over the period 2007 to 2027. This context is particularly instructive for testing the impact hypothesis because the Church-Family of God works with some of the poorest and most vulnerable populations in the country, in areas affected by security crisis and economic precarity. Measuring the impact of projects in this context is challenging but essential for ensuring that resources are used effectively.

The article is organized as follows. Section two presents the theoretical framework, drawing on the impact evaluation literature, the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria, and the capability approach. Section three presents the methodology, including the research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques. Section four presents the findings, including the dimensions of living conditions affected by projects, the pathways of impact, and the methodological challenges of impact measurement. Section five discusses the findings, identifying factors that mediate impact and proposing a mixed-method approach to impact measurement. Section six concludes with implications for policy and practice.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Impact Evaluation Literature

Impact evaluation is a branch of evaluation that focuses on measuring the causal effects of an intervention on outcomes of interest. The central challenge of impact evaluation is the attribution problem: how to determine whether observed changes in outcomes are caused by the intervention rather than by other factors. The gold standard for impact evaluation is the randomized controlled trial, in which participants are randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. However, randomized controlled trials are not always feasible or appropriate, particularly in complex development contexts.

Alternative approaches to impact evaluation include quasi-experimental methods, such as difference-in-differences, propensity score matching, and instrumental variables. These methods attempt to construct a credible counterfactual: an estimate of what would have happened to beneficiaries in the absence of the intervention. Without a credible counterfactual, evaluators cannot attribute observed changes to the intervention.

The impact evaluation literature is relevant to the impact hypothesis because it addresses the fundamental question of causality. Concrete improvement in beneficiary living conditions may be observed, but that improvement may be due to factors other than the project, such as economic growth, government programs, or simply the passage of time. For improvement to testify to project success, it must be credibly attributed to the project.

2.2 The OECD/DAC Evaluation Criteria

The OECD/DAC evaluation criteria provide a framework for assessing development projects that is widely used by funding agencies and implementing organizations. The criteria include relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability. Impact is defined as the positive and negative, primary and secondary, intended and unintended effects produced by the intervention.

The OECD/DAC criteria are relevant to the impact hypothesis because they explicitly link impact to other evaluation criteria. Impact should not be assessed in isolation but in relation to effectiveness (Did the project achieve its objectives?) and sustainability (Will the impacts last?). Moreover, the criteria recognize that impacts can be positive or negative, intended or unintended. A project may improve some dimensions of living conditions while worsening others.

2.3 The Capability Approach

The capability approach, associated with the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, provides a framework for conceptualizing and measuring living conditions. The capability approach shifts the focus from resources or utilities to what people are able to do and to be. Capabilities are the real freedoms that people have to achieve valuable functionings, such as being healthy, being educated, participating in community life, and having self-respect.

The capability approach is relevant to the impact hypothesis because it provides a multidimensional framework for defining and measuring living conditions. Living conditions are not reducible to income or consumption; they include health, education, social connection, political voice, and psychological well-being. A project that increases income but undermines health or social cohesion may not improve living conditions in a meaningful sense.

2.4 The Logical Framework Approach

The logical framework approach, or log frame, is a planning and evaluation tool that distinguishes between inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact. Inputs are the resources invested in the project (money, staff, materials). Activities are the actions taken by the project (training, construction, distribution). Outputs are the immediate products of activities (number of people trained, number of classrooms built). Outcomes are the intermediate effects of outputs (improved knowledge, increased access to services). Impact is the long-term effects on living conditions (reduced poverty, improved health).

The logical framework approach is relevant to the impact hypothesis because it distinguishes outcome from impact. Concrete improvement in living conditions is impact, not outcome. Many projects are evaluated at the outcome level because impact is difficult to measure and takes time to materialize. However, the hypothesis that improvement testifies to success implies that impact measurement is essential.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The research employs a mixed-method design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to impact measurement. The quantitative component aims to measure changes in beneficiary living conditions before and after projects, using survey data. The qualitative component aims to understand the mechanisms through which projects affect living conditions and to capture dimensions of living conditions that are difficult to quantify.

3.2 Data Collection

Document analysis included project documents, baseline and endline surveys, and monitoring and evaluation reports from fifteen dioceses over the period 2007 to 2027.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eighty beneficiaries across the fifteen dioceses. The interview guide covered living conditions before the project, changes experienced during and after the project, attribution of changes to the project or other factors, and perceptions of project impact. Interviews were conducted in French and in the local languages Moore and Dioula. Each interview lasted approximately sixty minutes and was audio-recorded with the participant's informed consent.

Beneficiary surveys were administered to a sample of five hundred project beneficiaries and three hundred non-beneficiaries (comparison group). The survey questionnaire included modules on income, employment, access to basic services, health, education, food security, and social capital. Surveys were administered in person by trained enumerators at baseline and at endline.

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, difference-in-differences analysis, and propensity score matching. Difference-in-differences analysis compares the change in outcomes for beneficiaries to the change for non-beneficiaries, controlling for pre-existing differences. Propensity score matching creates a matched comparison group based on observable characteristics.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo software.

3.4 Methodological Challenges

The research confronted several methodological challenges. The attribution problem was addressed through the use of a comparison group and difference-in-differences analysis. The selection problem was addressed through propensity score matching. The timing of measurement was addressed by conducting endline surveys at least one year after project completion for most projects. The heterogeneity of impacts was addressed through subgroup analysis.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Dimensions of Living Conditions Affected by Projects

The analysis identified seven dimensions of living conditions that were affected by Church-Family of God development projects.

Income was the most frequently affected dimension. Projects that provided microcredit, agricultural inputs, or vocational training increased beneficiary income. A beneficiary from the diocese of Kaya explained: "Before the project, I was earning almost nothing. Now I have a small business selling vegetables. My income has tripled."

Employment was the second dimension. Projects that provided vocational training, job placement services, or support for small enterprises increased beneficiary employment. However, the effects on employment were often modest, and many beneficiaries remained underemployed.

Access to basic services was the third dimension. Projects that constructed boreholes, health centers, or schools increased access to water, health care, and education. A beneficiary from the diocese of Dori explained: "Before the borehole, we walked three kilometers to fetch water. Now we have water in our village. It has changed our lives."

Health was the fourth dimension. Projects that provided health education, mosquito nets, or improved water and sanitation reduced the incidence of waterborne diseases and malaria. However, health effects were often difficult to measure precisely and required long follow-up periods.

Education was the fifth dimension. Projects that constructed classrooms, provided school supplies, or supported teacher training increased school enrollment and attendance. However, effects on learning outcomes were more difficult to achieve and required sustained investment.

Food security was the sixth dimension. Projects that provided agricultural inputs, irrigation, or improved storage reduced the frequency of food shortages and the severity of hunger. A beneficiary from the diocese of Fada-Ngourma explained: "Before the project, we often went hungry. Now we have enough to eat, and we even have surplus to sell."

Social capital was the seventh dimension. Projects that supported community associations, cooperatives, or participatory planning increased trust, cooperation, and collective action. Beneficiaries reported stronger social networks and greater ability to work together to solve common problems.

4.2 Pathways of Impact

The analysis identified four pathways through which projects improved living conditions.

Direct provision of goods and services was the first pathway. Projects that constructed boreholes, health centers, or schools provided direct benefits to beneficiaries. The impact of these projects was relatively straightforward to measure, as the provision of the good or service was the intended outcome.

Income generation was the second pathway. Projects that provided microcredit, agricultural inputs, or vocational training increased beneficiary income, which in turn improved other dimensions of living conditions, such as food security, health, and education. The impact of these projects was more indirect and depended on how beneficiaries used their increased income.

Capacity building was the third pathway. Projects that provided training, education, or technical assistance increased beneficiary knowledge, skills, and confidence. These capacity gains enabled beneficiaries to improve their living conditions through their own efforts, even after the project ended.

Social mobilization was the fourth pathway. Projects that supported community associations, cooperatives, or participatory planning strengthened social capital. Stronger social capital enabled communities to address collective problems, to advocate for their interests, and to support vulnerable members.

4.3 Methodological Challenges in Impact Measurement

The analysis identified several methodological challenges that complicate the measurement of project impact.

The attribution problem was the most fundamental challenge. Beneficiaries reported improvements in their living conditions, but those improvements were often due to multiple factors, including economic growth, government programs, and their own efforts. Disentangling the contribution of the project was difficult. A beneficiary from the diocese of Ouahigouya explained: "My life has improved, but is it because of the project? I also got a new job, and the government built a road. It is hard to say what caused what."

The selection problem was the second challenge. Beneficiaries were not randomly selected; they were often those who were more motivated, better connected, or less poor. Comparing beneficiaries to non-beneficiaries without controlling for these pre-existing differences would overstate project impact. Propensity score matching helped to address this problem but could not eliminate it entirely.

The timing of measurement was the third challenge. Impacts often take time to materialize. A project that provides vocational training may not affect income for a year or more, as beneficiaries complete training, search for jobs, and establish businesses. Measuring impact too soon would understate project effects. Measuring impact too late would make it difficult to attribute changes to the project, as other factors would have intervened.

The heterogeneity of impacts was the fourth challenge. Projects did not affect all beneficiaries equally. Women, youth, the poorest, and those in more remote areas often experienced different effects than other groups. A project manager from the diocese of Banfora explained: "The project worked well for some people but not for others. We need to understand why."

4.4 The Validity of the Impact Hypothesis

The findings support the hypothesis that concrete improvement in beneficiary living conditions testifies to project success and efficacy. Projects that were perceived as successful by beneficiaries and stakeholders were consistently those that produced measurable improvements in living conditions. Conversely, projects that did not produce such improvements were perceived as unsuccessful, even when they achieved their output targets.

However, the findings also indicate that measuring improvement requires careful attention to methodological challenges. Simple before-after comparisons without a credible counterfactual are insufficient. Impact evaluation must be rigorous, using appropriate methods to address attribution, selection, timing, and heterogeneity.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The Importance of Impact Measurement

The findings underscore the importance of impact measurement for development projects. Output-based evaluation, while easier and cheaper, is insufficient for determining whether projects are actually improving living conditions. A project may achieve its output targets but have no impact on beneficiary well-being. Impact measurement is essential for accountability, learning, and resource allocation.

5.2 The Value of Mixed-Method Approaches

The findings support the use of mixed-method approaches to impact measurement. Quantitative methods, such as surveys and statistical analysis, are essential for measuring the magnitude and distribution of impacts. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and case studies, are essential for

understanding the mechanisms through which impacts occur and for capturing dimensions of living conditions that are difficult to quantify.

5.3 The Role of Context

The findings also underscore the importance of context in shaping project impact. A project that works well in one context may fail in another. The security crisis, economic conditions, and socio-cultural dynamics of Burkina Faso all affected project impact. Impact evaluations must be context-sensitive and should not assume that results from one setting will generalize to others.

5.4 Implications for the Church-Family of God

The findings have several implications for the Church-Family of God. First, the Church should invest in impact evaluation capacity, including training for staff and systems for data collection and analysis. Second, the Church should prioritize projects that are likely to produce measurable improvements in living conditions, based on evidence from past projects. Third, the Church should learn from projects that have failed to produce impact, using those lessons to improve future projects.

6. CONCLUSION

This article has tested the hypothesis that concrete improvement in beneficiary living conditions testifies to project success and efficacy. The findings support the hypothesis, but with important qualifications. Improvement is a valid indicator of success, but measuring improvement requires rigorous methods to address attribution, selection, timing, and heterogeneity.

The article has identified seven dimensions of living conditions affected by Church-Family of God projects, four pathways of impact, and four methodological challenges in impact measurement. It has proposed a mixed-method approach to impact measurement that combines quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and participatory methods.

Future research should develop and test impact evaluation methods that are appropriate for fragile contexts. Research should also investigate the conditions under which projects are most likely to

produce impact, and the factors that explain heterogeneity in impact across beneficiary groups. Finally, research should examine the cost-effectiveness of different approaches to impact measurement, balancing rigor with feasibility.

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