Beneficiary Assessment in Bank Projects

Definition

The professionals and policy makers who plan projects and programs are often far removed from the people for whom these activities are intended. Beneficiary Assessment (BA) is a method that can be used to gather information about how an activity is perceived and valued by its principal users. The use of the BA approach allows for the views of key actors and stakeholders such as the poor, service providers, NGOs, community leaders and local government officials to be heard and incorporated into project work. Consultation with local people allows projects to respond to felt needs, and provides the basis for involving stakeholders in various aspects of project design and implementation, building commitment and ultimately ownership and accountability.

BA is a qualitative, social assessment method of investigation and evaluation that consists of three kinds of data collection techniques: (i) in-depth conversational interviewing (with individuals or groups) around key themes or topics, (ii) direct observation and participant observation (where the individual lives in the community for a short time), and (iii) review and analysis of written documents. This methodological approach is not meant to supplant questionnaire surveys and other traditional methods for data gathering; rather it complements these methods with reliable and useful information for task managers and policymakers on the socio-cultural context and perceptions of a beneficiary/client population. It is an intermediation tool that allows for systematic and continuous tracking of client attitudes from identification, through preparation to implementation of a project.

The Uses of BA

The BA approach examines how people behave, and why they behave as they do. The information derived from qualitative approaches such as this can be used to:

- help identify and mitigate any potential adverse social impacts; and
- develop local resources, build local capacity and in-country knowledge.

BA is systematic consultation with project beneficiaries and other stakeholders to help identify and design a development activity, to signal any potential constraints to their participation, and to obtain feedback on reactions to an intervention during implementation (Box 1). This approach has been instituted in the country work programs of AFI and SA2PH as a management tool to improve quality.

Box 1
MALI: The Use of Beneficiary Assessment in an Education Sector Project

A BA was done in Mali as part of an education project to try and understand why parents in rural areas did not send their children to school. Attendance of girls was especially low. The BA found that the costs of transportation and feeding the child at school, plus the opportunity costs of losing the child's labor at home, outweighed the benefits of a poor quality education with few prospects for finding a job. These findings led to reformulation of policy to (i) reduce costs to beneficiaries by building schools in closer proximity, (ii) increase attendance by designing a girls' component and (iii) training of teachers to improve the relationship between parents and the school system.

Bank Experience to Date

Between 1983-1995, the BA approach has been used in at least 59 Bank projects in 36 countries and, across six sectors. BA has mostly been employed in sectors with a social delivery orientation (health, population, education, agriculture, water supply and urban projects) where it is especially important to gauge user demand (see Box 2). While usage in other sectors has been limited, there is an increasing recognition among donors of BA's usefulness and...
versatility in gauging effective demand in sectors such as energy and industry. Conversational interviewing, focus groups and direct observation have proven especially effective ways to address sensitive issues, such as gender, and to identify at risk groups, including indigenous people, the landless, and groups outside the "formal" sector.

Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs)
PPAs are an important instrument for focusing policy on poverty reduction. They use the BA approach as an instrument to gather the views and concerns of the poor and popular perceptions of factors affecting poverty. The results are used in designing more effective poverty reduction strategies responsive to different categories of poor people. PPAs can increase understanding of the socio-cultural constraints of the poor to access to land, credit, agricultural inputs and markets. This information can be used to examine and sharpen the poverty focus of incentive and regulatory frameworks; for example, to emphasize "poverty conscious" restructuring of public expenditure allocations to primary education, preventative health or access to safe water; to improve the targeting of formal safety nets and to support informal ones.

Using BA in PPAs or Social Action Programs (SAPs) is a flexible, pragmatic, cost effective approach to monitoring trends in poverty and assessing the need for targeted programs. To date, PPAs have been completed or are underway in 16 countries including Brazil, Cameroon, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mexico, and Zambia. Other related economic sector work using participatory approaches has been conducted in Argentina, Benin and Uganda.

Box 2
Lesotho: The Impact of Beneficiary Assessment on a Health Sector Project
An in-depth qualitative analysis of individual and household behavior was conducted using BA. Participant Observers were sent to study three communities for three months. They found that villagers did not use the services of the government health worker because there was no curative medicine and general treatment of patients was poor. An unsteady supply of contraceptives deterred women from making the long trek to the clinics. Fees were seen as too high by the poor, and considered too low by the well off. The direct impact of the BA was: village health workers were supplied with aspirin and simple remedies, contraceptive supplies were improved, and user fees were adjusted according to ability to pay.

Issues and Lessons Learned
A 1993 review undertaken in order to assess the use of BA in Bank projects, found the following from interviews with 25 task managers:

- Value Added. BA studies influenced policy and led to changes in project design through improved targeting, efficiency and effectiveness of programs; informed policy with otherwise unavailable and/or new information (for example, assessing how various socio-economic groups are coping in situations of rapid change); increased sustainability by providing operationally-oriented feedback from client population; gave voice to the poor by indicating what the poor see as problems and possible solutions; and promoted dialogue, ownership and commitment by involving all stakeholders in listening and consultation. Examples from the Zambia Social Recovery Project and Lesotho Health Sector provide evidence that beneficiary participation is correlated to project effectiveness and sustainability.

- Linking qualitative studies with statistically representative surveys. When studies were ineffective, it was because the BA studies tended to generate information that was too descriptive and/or not perceived as useful by task managers and policy makers. Methodology and the appropriate involvement of decisionmakers should ensure that the information and data generated are representative and inform policy. Representative sampling procedures can ensure adequate coverage (by income, class, ethnicity, gender, climate, topography etc).

- Expertise and resources required. Most of the BAs were done as single non-repeated exercises. This was attributed to lack of resources in allocation of staff weeks for follow-up, weak field supervision, monitoring and evaluation, or lack of in-house field assessors trained in qualitative research techniques, all of which compromised the quality of the final BA report. However, the average cost of a BA was small (about $40,000) relative to total project costs.

- Promoting implementation of policy recommendations. Out of 39 projects reviewed, only three studies were not utilized by governments. The latter were attributable to poor relations between the government and the implementing agencies, or lack of government commitment. Care must be taken to develop mechanisms for dialogue with government, NGOs and other key stakeholders to develop ownership and promote implementation of policy recommendations arising from the study.

Conclusion
The next steps should focus on:
- building Bank and in-country capacity in BA through training;
- developing operational tools and disseminating best practice; and
- increasing staff competency with formative research skills.