Looking for long-run development effectiveness:

An autonomy-centred framework for project evaluation

Mirtha R. Muñiz Castillo

Des Gasper

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Authors:

Mirtha R. Muñiz Castillo
Maastricht Graduate School of Governance
Maastricht University
Email: mirtha.munizcastillo@maastrichtuniversity.nl

Prof. Dr. Des Gasper
Institute of Social Studies, The Hague
Erasmus University Rotterdam
Email: gasper@iss.nl

Mailing address
Universiteit Maastricht
Maastricht Graduate School of Governance
P.O. Box 616
6200 MD Maastricht
The Netherlands

Visiting address
Kapoenstraat 2, 6211 KW Maastricht
Phone: +31 43 3884650
Fax: +31 43 3884864
Email: info-gov@maastrichtuniversity.nl

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Abstract

Projects retain a crucial role in international aid. There are standard ways to evaluate them in terms of predefined objectives and the logic of connections for reaching those objectives. Projects typically face sustainability problems once the inducement of external resources is over, for their project logic is too narrow.

In contrast, this paper proposes an interpretive analytical framework to assess project effects on human lives, in particular the effects on individual autonomy. It goes beyond looking at project outputs and short-run effectiveness in terms of project-specified objectives, and proposes a *development effectiveness* criterion that looks at whether and how projects positively influence individual autonomy: a *human autonomy effectiveness* criterion. The focus is on individuals as agents of change, and on individuals' goals and values, rather than on projects as designed to directly produce other changes. The framework identifies relevant processes, practices and relationships during a project cycle. It aims at contributing to design, implementation and evaluation of aid projects so that participants are able to achieve valued goals, with greater chance of sustained positive effects.

The paper is based on a completed study of four infrastructure projects in Nicaragua and El Salvador supported by the aid agency of Luxembourg, between 1999 and 2005. [*]

Keywords:

Project evaluation, logical framework, autonomy, human development

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1   Introduction

Project evaluation usually focuses on intended and tangible project outputs and their direct impacts ('project purpose' or 'immediate objectives'). A linear causal logic already specified for the project, such as in a 'logical framework', holds that the achievement of such outputs and purposes leads to particular positive outcomes or development goals. This practice runs the risk of distracting us from the most relevant outcomes: the project effects on people's lives more broadly and in the longer term. Tangible outputs are only means to be used by people to promote their goals. This study proposes an evaluation criterion called 'human autonomy effectiveness', in which *the expansion of individual autonomy* is considered a priority goal.

Autonomy is intrinsically valuable for well-being and instrumentally valuable to promote human development[1]. First, people value helping themselves in significant aspects of their lives and they do exercise autonomy, to different extents, even under constrained circumstances. Second, the more autonomous people have more options and are better able to choose the life they want to lead and to take action to achieve it with authentic (i.e., not extrinsic) motivation. They are also more likely to expand the potentials or capabilities that they most value (Sen, 1985a; 1993, 1999, etc.). If necessary, they can enact significant social change in coordination with others to pursue common goals, improving their present and future well-being.

These observations imply that the promotion of autonomy and human development can go in parallel and that autonomy improves the quality of human development because people feel development as their own. Nevertheless, the poorest and most excluded people in many situations cannot choose and access certain crucial resources. Then, promoting a truly human development requires helping them to exercise their voice and changing the terms in which development as merely material progress has been pursued (cf., Carmen, 2000; Max-Neef, Elizalde & Hopenhayn, 1991). An aid project can be an opportunity for human development led by project participants.

The framework proposed in this paper focuses on *human beings,* final aid recipients who live in specific communities, not only on 'the project'. Further, aid projects take place in specific national and local contexts that imprint their character on what happens, and are influenced also by policies and practices in international contexts. It is then necessary to look at *multilevel* contexts in which social actors interact.

This paper draws on a completed study (2004-8) of four infrastructure projects in Nicaragua and El Salvador that were supported by the aid agency of Luxembourg between 1999 and 2005 (Muñiz Castillo, 2009). Data used in that study include project documents, public national reports, external statistics, stakeholders' interviews, focus group discussions and a questionnaire survey. The fieldwork study was carried out in 2005.

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[1] 'Human development refers to (i) a sustainable improvement in well-being or a positive change in the actual lives that people lead – that include objective and subjective aspects, and (ii) the expansion of valuable human potentials (capabilities) that secure a life with dignity for everyone in interaction with others' (Muñiz Castillo, 2009, p. 24).

We will use evidence from one of the projects to illustrate our general argument. The project involved about 500 households in a rural village in the East of El Salvador. It aimed at improving the health and living conditions of the residents through the provision of stable access to drinking water service and the improvement of the environment via sanitation and environmental protection actions. The project was managed by a project implementation unit (PIU) led by a foreign project chief, who coordinated the project activities with the partner public water company and with subcontracted local NGOs and firms. The community organisation collaborated with project staff in mobilising residents and supervising activities. All households worked in small self-construction activities.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 presents a conceptual model of autonomy. Section 3 develops the criterion of human autonomy effectiveness. Section 4 formalises the analytical framework. Section 5 presents the main conclusions.

2 A conceptual model of autonomy

We adopt a conception of autonomy as a person's capability to make choices in significant matters and achieve positive results in his or her life. Empowerment is the result of an effective exercise of autonomy, for which individuals may require joint efforts with others. Through these efforts they can promote their own human development. This section outlines a model of autonomy (Muñiz Castillo, 2009) and presents the notion of empowerment used hereafter.

2.1 Autonomy is a priority capability influenced by several factors

Autonomy is defined as a *combined capability* (Nussbaum, 2000) to distinguish between: (a) an internal element, which corresponds to *agency* in the sense of the capacity to make reasoned choices and act accordingly, and (b) and an external element, the environment that promotes or restricts opportunities for the exercise of agency.[2]

At a conceptual level, autonomy is therefore *qualified effective agency*. It is effective because it means that individuals can take action to advance their goals, if they so decide, given that the influence of contexts is already taken into account – this is the idea of capability as possible reachable outcomes. It is qualified because autonomy concerns decisions on significant aspects of life (Taylor, 1979; Doyal & Gough, 1991; Kabeer, 1999), decisions which cohere with one's own values and personality and for which one is self- motivated.

It is worth noticing two important features:

1. Autonomy is not detached from relatedness. Social networks, as both resources and players in structural contexts, can support individual actions. Moreover, when relatedness (and competence) is a result of autonomous behaviours, people display optimal engagement and psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 243).

2. Although contexts shape values and opportunities, autonomy is an individual feature of unique human beings with their own biographies, emotions, aspirations and commitments. As Christman (1998) affirms, 'the autonomous person is one who acts, chooses, and judges

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[2] Sen (1999) defines agency as: 'the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world' (p. 18). Our conception of agency is at a half-way point between Sen's notion and agency as the human ability to act purposively. There is a long debate about relations between agency and structure and which aspect has priority (e.g., Alexander, 1992; Archer, 2002; Booth, 1994; King, 2004; Long, 2001; Long & van der Ploeg, 1994). We consider that both are important and that autonomy depends on both. Sen's notion of agency is closer to ours of autonomy, but we explicitly acknowledge the role of contexts.

for herself (however complex, embedded and interconnected with others that self turns out to be)' (p. 387).

At a practical level, autonomy as a capability (feasible to be exercised) can be analysed in terms of three determinants: entitlements, agency and multilevel structural contexts, which are to be studied individually and in interaction (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: A conceptual model of autonomy
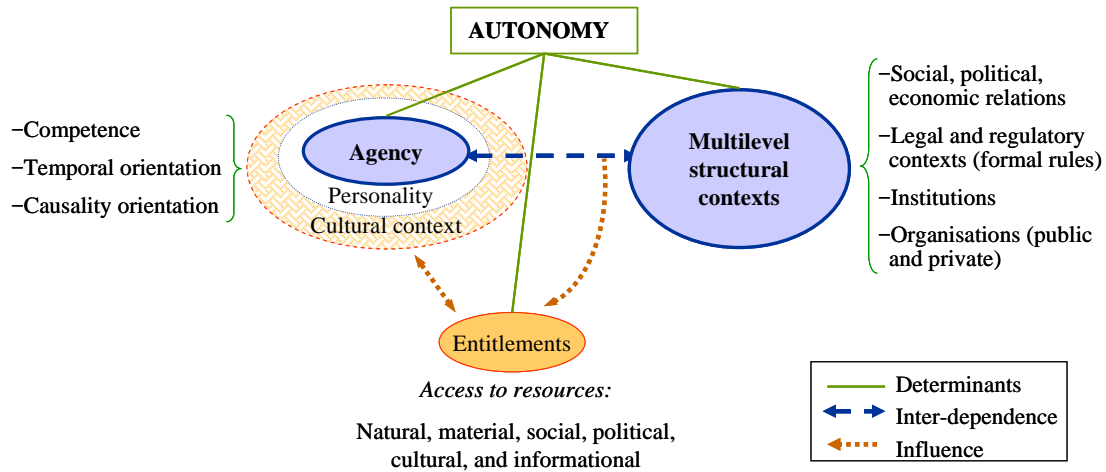
Entitlements represent the access to resources. People are entitled to use certain resources to promote their goals when they own or get these resources from market or non-market channels (e.g. public goods, social transfers, relationships). Entitlements are negotiated in multilevel structural contexts and their meaning is given by the use that individuals make of resources, which is culturally influenced.

Agency depends on several elements. Competence is the capacity to perform well, to be able to use personal abilities to reach goals. These abilities can be physical, intellectual or emotional. Self-confidence is essential for autonomy because how individuals regard themselves and their efficacy will partially influence their objectives, aspirations, and perceptions about the opportunities and risks in the external environment (Bandura, 2000). Self-perceived competence is influenced by contexts and fuels intentional action.

The model includes two *internal contexts* (Alexander, 1992): personality and cultural context. Figure 1 presents them as concentric circles around agency to indicate that these contexts influence agency. The cultural context (larger circle) is filtered by the personality of each individual that gives meaning to the cultural and external contexts.

Moreover, agency is influenced by two *forms of internal orientation*: temporal orientation (Emirbayer & Mische, 1995) and causality orientation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000). Table 1 presents the variants of each type of orientation.

Table 1: Types of internal processes of agency

Temporal orientation	Causality orientation
Iterative (past)	Control (external reasons)
Projective (future)	Autonomy (internal reasons)
Practical-evaluative (present)	Impersonal (no reasons)

Source: Emirbayer and Mische (1995); Deci and Ryan (1985; 2000)

Temporal orientation is the tendency of individuals to give *more weight* to the past, the present or the future when they analyse possible actions, that is, if they act following past patterns of thought or habits, make their judgements in response to events in the

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evolving situations, or imaginatively generate possible future trajectories of action.[3] The latter element is related to the 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai, 2004) that, when expressed in voice and participation, can stimulate development.

Causality orientation refers to what are the reasons to act in a certain way, as the agent perceives them. Individuals can consider that: (i) they are originators of events, (ii) they behave as they must (due to external reasons), or (iii) whatever happens is independent of their intentions. An orientation of the first type is called 'autonomy' orientation. It implies more than being 'in control' of events or contexts. For example, a villager could feel competent to build a home sanitation system to dispose of grey water (from kitchens, lavatories and bathrooms) and actually build it, so feeling in control of this specific process and satisfied with the outcome. However, if he or she did not value the system and only built it because project staff required it, this person would not have an autonomy causality orientation.[4]

The *structural contexts* are the external environments in which individuals negotiate their roles, meaning systems (Alexander, 1993) and entitlements. These contexts can be analysed at household, group, community, local, national or international level. They comprise all sets of social relations (economic, political and associational) coordinated with stable or sporadic, formal or informal rules. Institutions or systems of social rules that structure social interactions (Hodgson, 2006) and organisations are elements of these contexts.

Autonomy has two levels: a basic and a critical level. Basic autonomy requires a certain level of competence and satisfaction of human needs so that individuals are not prevented to participate effectively in social life and can expand their achievements in valuable aspects of their lives. That level of competence depends on the particular cultural setting. Critical autonomy (Doyal & Gough, 1991) requires a higher level of competence, intercultural knowledge and political freedom. Individuals with critical autonomy can compare cultural rules, reflect upon the rules of their own culture, and work with others to change them, or move to another culture if everything else fails (ibid, p. 67, 187-8). This individual can look for and reach a significant change in his or her life and the lives of other people.

2.2   *Empowerment results from the exercise of autonomy*

The concept of empowerment has been broadly discussed (e.g., Narayan, 2002; Alsop, ed., 2004; Narayan, ed., 2005; Alsop, Bertelsen & Holland, 2006) although sometimes overused given its relatively imprecise meaning. In our model, empowerment refers to the exercise of autonomy, and its evaluation requires looking at the effectiveness of decisions.

However, concluding whether decisions were autonomous is not easy. On the one hand, behaviours are not always product of authentic motivation, that is, people do not necessarily have autonomy causality orientation and endorse their actions and their possible consequences, feeling responsible for them. On the other hand, not all options are valu-

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[3] Each kind of orientation has elements of the past, present and future. Individuals led by an iterative (past) orientation contrast their past experiences to current contingencies in order to produce stable expectations. Likewise, individuals led by a practical-evaluative (present) orientation take into account the consequences of their actions, when selecting how best to achieve their goals. Individuals use the three kinds of orientation to different extents, but one orientation prevails. A person's temporal orientation may vary with the area of life to which the decision (action) refers.

[4] This example underlines the difference between 'locus of causality' and 'locus of control': 'why a person behaves as he or she does [and] what controls a person's outcomes' (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 113)

able and not all matters are important. With respect to the *valuable matters*, it is relevant to analyse whether people are able to bring their goals about.

Three questions are useful to evaluate if there has been empowerment (Sen, 1985b; 1996; 2002/2003):

(i) Do people act in pursuing their objectives? This is related to process freedom or control over how the decisions are made. The focus is on how people live their lives, whether they exercise autonomy or not.

(ii) Do external influences produce the expected results? Outcomes may be caused by factors other than an autonomous action. Actors could have opportunity freedom because the outcomes of actions made by others are favourable to them.

(iii) Does the action produce the expected results? A positive answer tells us that the person had control over the process of choice and achieved the intended outcomes. The focus is on both process and outcomes.

The analysis of empowerment focuses on the third question, but the other questions are also relevant. For example, a housing project would have importance if it provides physical security. This is the case even if the project beneficiaries did not elaborate the project proposal, did not choose the house design or did not work in the construction activities. It is desirable that people enjoy positive outcomes or results even if they do not participate in the process to achieve them. Their well-being and agency will be enhanced.

The expansion of 'autonomy' and not only 'empowerment' is important for human development. However, empowerment should be of priority because it supports the capacity of people to effect change in their own lives. If people consider that their actions have real positive outcomes, their self-confidence to initiate actions will improve. In the context of aid projects, the degree of this positive effect on autonomy depends on the role that participants had and their motivations to participate (Muñiz Castillo, 2009).

Returning to our water project, the villagers who built the sanitation system had control on the process – their community leaders even supervised the works – and reached the expected outcomes. However, for some of them, building the system was not a decision based on the conviction that it was useful for their health. They will be less interested than others in using and maintaining such systems well.

3 A new definition of effectiveness for project evaluation

Projects retain a crucial role in international aid. In general, their role is to fill the gaps that poor countries face in terms of resources, skills and systems (Riddell, 2007, p. 180) to improve the well-being of their citizens. However, the best way to make these gains in well-being sustainable and to promote further enhancements once aid flows are withdrawn—in other words, to fulfil the meta-purpose—is to increase the capacity of people to help themselves.

This section introduces the concept of project logic and discusses the customary evaluation criteria. Effectiveness refers to the extent to which objectives are achieved, taking into account their relative importance (OECD, 2002, p. 20). However, several objectives of aid are difficult to quantify, the causal assumptions used in the design often do not hold, and several external and country specific structural factors affect outcomes. Correspondingly, the section introduces a new and arguably more relevant interpretation of effectiveness, which we call human autonomy effectiveness.

3.1 The logical framework and its explicit priorities

The most used tool in project design is the logical framework approach, which is made operational through the logframe matrix (see Eggers, 1998) or 'logframe'. Projects comprise, at least on paper, a series of activities with defined objectives. The logframe defines a series of causal links between a project and its objectives, establishing an explicit hierarchy, as shown in Figure 2 (from left to right).

Figure 2: The central causal link in the logframe matrix

Implementation of the project				Effects of the project	
Inputs	Activities	Outputs		Outcomes	Impacts
Resources, staff, technical features	Process	Operational results		Purposes or near-term impacts	Overall goals or long-term impacts

Sphere of (relative) control: Project staff				Sphere of influence: Boundary partners	Sphere of concern: Final beneficiaries
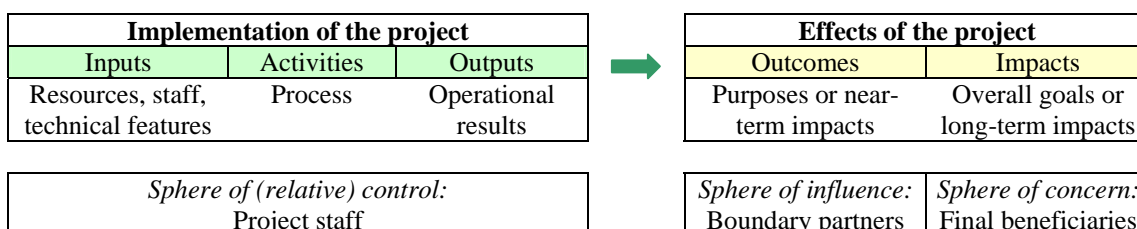
Source: Hofmann et al. (2004) and Crawford et al. (2005).

The *outputs* are the foreseen and intended results of the activities of the project carried out with its respective inputs. The arrow in the figure represents the most contestable part of the matrix because it reflects the expected causal link between the operational results and their effects on *people's lives*.

Project staff can secure outputs, to a certain extent, but the realisation of the intended effects depends on other people's behaviours. In our water project case, an expected output was: 'a drinking water network is created and put into operation', which was reasonably secured by technical staff. However, the outcome or specific purpose 'to provide a stable access to drinking water service' depends on other social actors such as the public water company or the community organisation, whose behaviours can change over time[5].

Reaching an overall goal 'to contribute to the improvement of the health and living conditions of local inhabitants' is complex. To pass from having access to safe drinking water at home to enjoying good health requires affordable water bills, good hygiene habits, adequate sanitation systems and solid waste collection, good maintenance of water systems, and much more. These sorts of requirements (for each level of result) are supposed to be included as *assumptions* or risk factors in the logframe, related to aspects external to the project. The validity of such assumptions is rarely reviewed over time.

In fact, change can be influenced by non-project factors, unintended interactions of a project with other factors, unintended routes and unforeseen effects (Conway & Maxwell, 1999; Gasper, 1999). This array of possible influences, pathways and effects is not captured by a logframe. The approach is easily and often misused (Gasper, 1999, 2000a, 2000b), resulting in, for example, production of a 'lack-frame' that is overly simple or a 'lock-frame' that is too rigid to changes after its design.

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[5] The UK Department for International Development (DfID) has developed a tool called 'outputs-to-purpose review' to assess, based on the logframe, whether the outputs are likely to achieve the intended outcome or purpose of a project. Such reviews aim at involving project staff, partner institutions and other stakeholders to reflect on the project progress and give recommendations. The way these actors are engaged in the review determines whether unintended project effects and unexpected challenges and risks can be identified and addressed. The reviews can lead to changes in the logical frameworks (see e.g., Messerschmidt, Turton, Bajracharya & Mandal, 2004).

Nevertheless, the logframe is potentially useful to make the project logic explicit and to make project design and implementation transparent conceptually. In addition, the logframe approach can, if the institutional setting is favourable, be used as a participatory tool to deepen the understandings of projects (Bell, 2000; Dearden & Kowalski, 2003), and perhaps even to recognise multiple views and differences in priorities (Gasper, 1999, 2000a).

The logframe includes for each intended result an objectively verifiable indicator and a means of verification, to be used for monitoring purposes. However, for this end, a logframe should be updated, considering the evolving goals and actions of project stakeholders over time.

Returning to Figure 2, project staff is under the sphere of control in 'the project logic' because personnel work to reach explicit outputs. 'Boundary partners' (Earl, Carden & Smutylo, 2001) such as the communal leaders or local politicians can only be influenced to support the project; however, their actions determine whether the outcomes will be achieved. Negotiations could take place, even leading to the redefinition or the inclusion of new objectives.

The ultimate beneficiaries (e.g., villagers whose needs are addressed) are the ones whose actions should influence the change process and the aid project in the first place. Nonetheless, it is very far from always the case that projects are truly responsive to their needs emerging beyond what is framed in the matrix.

On the other hand, as many actors and events will influence the achievement of overall goals, project staff alone cannot control or influence these results (Honadle & Cooper, 1989). Project staff will need to coordinate efforts with other stakeholders. Relations are important, so project staff should understand local contexts, values and perceptions.

3.2   *The project evaluation criteria and their limitations*

Relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability are the customary criteria to evaluate projects (EC, 2004). *Relevance* responds to the question whether the objectives and design of the project are appropriate to beneficiaries' needs and priorities.

Insofar as the objectives are achieved (i.e., the project is effective), the criterion of *efficiency* responds to the question whether there are better ways of achieving the results or better ways of using the resources. Economic cost-benefit analysis (CBA) is widely used to assess efficiency. It determines if a project brings a net welfare gain (with welfare conceived according to ability and willingness to pay) and how that gain compares with the ones from alternative projects. It includes assumptions about what is valuable (monetized benefits and costs and monetary equivalents) and for whom, and the role of the market as distributor of resources and determinant of economic values.

Impact is defined by OECD (2002a) as a 'positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effect produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended' (p. 24). In this study, impact has a comprehensive meaning. Similarly, as proposed by Roche (1999/2004), impacts are '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). This definition implies that:

- The relevant effects are on people's lives, what really matters (Hofmann, Roberts, Shoham & Harvey, 2004), whose richness cannot be captured only by quantitative indicators.

- Effects are not necessarily lasting, because of the interaction of several post-project factors. This problem is especially important in emergency cases, in which relief aid can save lives

in the short term, which is a significant effect per se, but does not assure a sustainable livelihood.

- Deciding which change is significant involves judgements (which involve choices of: for whom and by whom?).

In contrast, project evaluations tend to focus on immediate outputs so that what is assessed is operational effectiveness. Riddell (2007) reports that, under this criterion, recorded success rates have improved over time and ranged from 70% to about 85% (ibid., p. 180), although these rates are likely to be exaggerated and, further, the sustainability of those successes would be much lower.

Impact studies intend to test the causal relationships between achievement of formal project objectives at different levels and the project inputs and activities (i.e., attribution of achievements, to the project or to other factors). The methods used include cost-benefit analysis, econometric impact analysis, qualitative case studies, participatory studies, and so on. However, these evaluations, typically, only focus on *intended effects.*

Once project effects are identified, the next criterion is *sustainability*: How can the positive outcomes persist in the long run? White (2005) proposes to deepen a theory-based evaluation to assess sustainability and risk, clarifying key assumptions and identifying non-quantifiable risk-variables such as 'government commitment'. Fundamentally, sustainability depends on the existence of local social actors who have ownership of projects or reforms. However, sustainability results from combining local capacities, external advice and sound relations within multilevel structural contexts. Capacity building, in a way that fosters continuous learning and strengthens local institutions capable to effect change, is needed for sustainability and positive long-run impact (Honadle & Cooper, 1990; Mog, 2004).

3.3   An autonomy-centred criterion of development effectiveness

This paper proposes that project effectiveness should be assessed in relation to the degree to which individual autonomy has been expanded – in addition to, and indeed as more important than, (other) formal project goals. This criterion is named as *human autonomy effectiveness*, to differentiate it from:

- Operational effectiveness, which refers to the achievement of operational results under the sphere of control of project staff (section 3.1);
- Intended impact, which refers to the achievement of higher-level project goals, outside the sphere of control; and
- Economic effectiveness, focused on objectives expressible in monetary terms.

Project beneficiaries could have diverse goals (different from pre-defined project goals), on which they evaluate project effectiveness and, furthermore, some of these goals could be opposite or normatively contestable. Therefore, this evaluation criterion requires that the expansion of autonomy does not contract other priority capabilities (Alkire, 2002, p. 180). It is then necessary to discuss and agree on a capability hierarchy so that secondary goals that would constrain valuable capabilities are not pursued.[6] Then, our criterion of 'human autonomy' effectiveness refers to the promotion of autonomy that supports human development, but not to the achievement of particular goals (see section 4); not all personal goals are important for human development.

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[6] Several scholars have developed lists of such capabilities (see Alkire, 2002). Different qualitative and participatory methods can help to identify priority capabilities in particular contexts (White & Pettit, 2004). There are also mixed approaches based on explicit normative theories (see Robeyns, 2003).

To speak of 'human autonomy to promote human development' is seen by some commentators as a tautology, because human development is the expansion of freedom or autonomy. This comment arises in a short-term model, with effectively only three times: the start of the project, the process of the project, and the end of the project. We refer instead to a longer time perspective, including what comes after the end of the project. Whatever may be its direct contributions to human development during its duration, a project which fails to build persons' autonomy during and through its processes will fail to lead on to sustained and continuing post-project contributions to human development.

Treating impact as meaning significant change in people's lives (section 3.2), this study proposes an interpretive framework that puts at the centre of the analysis the experiences of social actors during the change process supported by a project (cf., Crawford et al., 2005). Even projects formally aiming at fostering democracy, good governance or empowerment have in practice not focused on individual lives and not considered human autonomy as an explicit project goal, on which to base an evaluation.

Ellerman (2006) develops an indirect approach for 'helping people help themselves' that focuses on the conditions and contexts in which aid is provided so that people can promote their own development. He stresses that aid agencies or 'the helpers' must respect, foster, and sustain the autonomy of project participants because aid agencies themselves do not do development (Ellerman, 2007, p. 6-7).

At the macro-level, Ellerman argues that conditionality by large aid agencies has often undercut the initiative and local capacities of poor recipient countries to help themselves. At the project level, Ellerman centres on the relations between project experts and intended beneficiaries – the supposed 'doers' in contraposition to passive aid recipients – and how the latter should use their existing capacities to address their problems with the help of experts, not blindly follow experts' instructions.

It is important that the significant change is not directed by outsiders but initiated by local people so that a project supports ongoing or self-motivated change; only such a change is sustainable (Ellerman, 2006). A pseudo-motivated change, visible during a project timeframe, could be result of an extrinsic motivation; aid recipients could behave as the project expects and play as 'good beneficiaries' in order to secure what they perceive the project can offer (cf., Wood, 2003). Traditional ex-post evaluations could wrongly consider this change as sustainable. So, impact should instead be assessed over a term that exceeds the usual timeframe of an aid project.

'Efficiency concerns the relationship between valuable results and the valuable means that have been used to achieve them' (Gasper, 2004, p. 57) and, therefore, judgements on the degree of efficiency depend on the objectives and values included and their relative weights. Under this criterion, the expansion of autonomy can be seen as a valuable benefit and the costs of different project practices (in addition to inputs) would need to be included. For instance, the costs of conditioning project participants to work in self-construction could be expressed in terms of time, cultural resources or economic opportunity cost. However, the analysis should extend beyond a business concern for only monetary costs and benefits. For instance, workload is not only a cost to be minimised; it could have a benefit in terms of self-respect resulting from such work, depending on the project context. In our water project case, women felt proud and happy because they learned and shared their experiences with others, regarding the use of the ecological woodstoves that they built.

This study proposes that projects should be evaluated in terms of *human autonomy effectiveness*, not in terms of a narrowly conceived economic efficiency. We present an

analytical framework to examine the impacts of projects on individual autonomy with special emphasis on *how* those impacts take place in relation to the processes and the outcomes of the projects.

4   An autonomy-centred framework for project evaluation

An impact assessment exercise focused on individual autonomy is challenging given that the target is complex and not easily quantifiable. We propose that individual autonomy can be promoted through (i) improvements in the determinants of individual autonomy as a capability, (ii) the exercise of autonomy during the project cycle, and/or (iii) the achievement of personal goals.

Our proposal explicitly studies the first two channels (see Figure 3). An analysis centred on personal goals is harder because individuals could have several kinds of goals. We emphasise instead, for project evaluation centred on the capability of autonomy, that it is crucial to identify the 'full' project logic and test the expected against the actual effects (section 4.2). In addition, it is necessary to identify which project processes (systemic series of activities leading to a defined goal) were valued by project participants and whether they were involved in such processes (section 4.3).

Figure 3: Channels to understand influences on individual autonomy
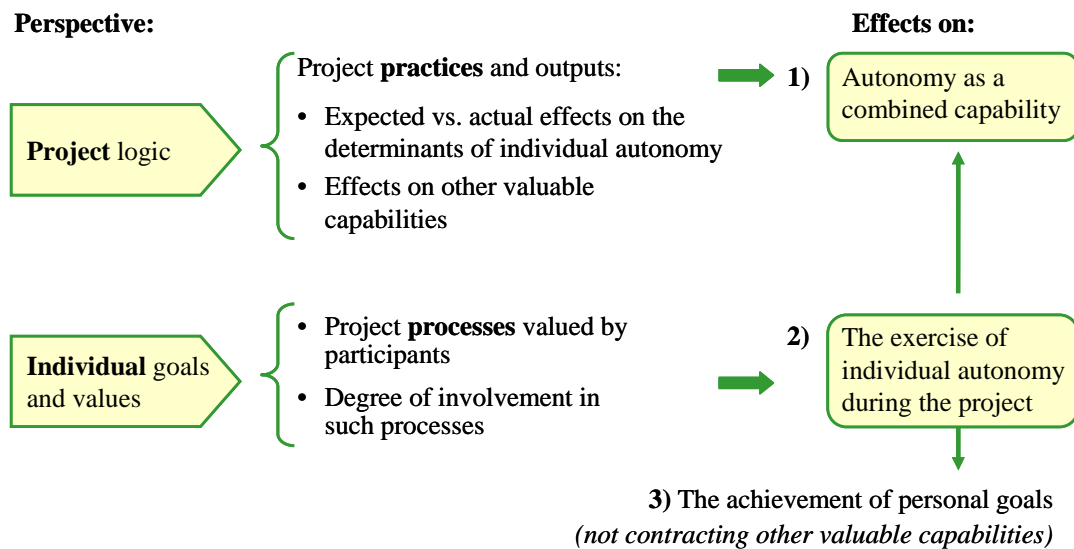
Regarding the first channel, the task is to analyse *how* individual autonomy can be promoted, by distinguishing between its determinants: entitlements, agency, and multilevel structural contexts (section 2.1). A project might have *different effects* on each one. Moreover, projects might affect the access to resources, individual skills, and power relations, but each in a *different way*. It might also be more accurate to speak of project influences than project effects, as many other factors will contribute to explain human development outcomes.

Regarding the second channel, we have to look explicitly at values and at local capacities to identify those project processes in which beneficiaries could be involved and were effectively involved. *Involvement* is a high-quality participation that means that beneficiaries are reasonably informed, are able to speak out and share in relevant decision-making. The levels of involvement could be compared using indexes based on questionnaire data or participatory rankings, after having defined the valued processes.

This section explores the concept of project logic, broadening it beyond the conventional engineering-derived perspective, to recognise that a project involves social interactions which affect the participants in various ways that may not be recognised in the project design but are fundamental to the prospects of the project, especially for the longer-term. Then, we propose a matrix to analyse changes in autonomy as a combined capability, discuss the role of values to identify the exercise of autonomy, and present the complete analytical framework.

4.1 The substance and implicit logic of a project: practices

Project documents and logical frameworks reflect the prevailing project theory (Rossi, Lipsey & Freeman, 2004) and express the explicit logic of a project (section 3.1).[7] However, a project is not only about what is written and expected, but also about *what* is done and *how* that is done. Practices reflect its *implicit* logic.

For example, a practice of hierarchical project management may reflect an assumption that project participants will do as they are told, that they have no independent objectives and no 'exit' options. Such practice is more dangerous when institutional contexts are uncertain and stakeholders have competing interests. In our water project case, this resulted in the 'alignment' of community leaders around project staff and the separation of the municipality mayor from project activities.

- ***The nature of project practices***

In addition to material inputs, project staff use certain practices (forms of interaction and practical strategies) to carry out the planned activities. These practices evolve over time, as result of the actions of social actors in specific contexts, and are manifested in several ways (Long & van der Ploeg, 1994). The practices are not rigidly linked to particular events or even formal project activities. An activity can be carried out in different ways, for instance, the monitoring of construction activities could be input-based (e.g., number of work hours) or output-based (e.g., number of houses built). The same activity can have different meanings for individuals in the same locality and can stimulate different (and sometimes opposite) responses, depending on each person's specific capacities, social standing and internal contexts of agency (personality and cultural context).

Practices reflect the power relations in specific communities and between local stakeholders and project staffs. For example, excessive conditionality during the execution of a project could signal that beneficiaries could not give feedback to the aid agency about how to improve their conditions, or that the project staff was unable to incorporate changes when necessary (i.e., a 'lock-frame' situation).

Understanding these project practices helps us to understand how a project works, how different it is from others (even in the same sector or with similar institutional contexts), and what makes it work in a given way (Pawson & Tilley, 2000). It helps us to understand, for example, how a 'program' is actually an umbrella label for many different things, for its full content and meaning varies dramatically between different cases. We will analyse four areas of practices: selection and design decisions; conditionality; coordination; and accountability.

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[7] Project progress reports reflect the theory of the project managers who interpret, to outsiders, how the project is carried out and can be possibly successful. Other project stakeholders may or may not work to sustain those 'dominant' interpretations (Mosse, 2005).

Selection and design decisions are made over the project cycle. The initial selection criteria could change over time, with diverse effects on individual entitlements and agency. Relevant questions are: Did stakeholders participate in the design of the project? Was there a needs assessment study to explore the utility of the project or alternative projects? Who led the process? What was the role of political authorities and donors? Did experts show respect by taking into account or being led by the ideas of intended beneficiaries?

Conditionality refers to whether aid recipients are induced to act in a certain way to receive the aid. It can be related to practices between donors and aid recipients at the macro level. Conditionality is an ineffective way to build local project ownership, which can only be enhanced or facilitated, not created (de Valk, Apthorpe & Guimarães, 2005; Ellerman, 2006). For instance, communal work in infrastructure projects can be tied to the granting of aid. However, project participants could feel their self-confidence or opportunities to make significant decisions harmed, if they neither internalised that condition nor saw it necessary to reach a more important goal.[8]

Looking at the roles of different groups during a project, their commitments, the extent and degree of participation (whether forced or voluntary), and the existence of co-payments and how these were defined, helps to judge whether practices are (i) *controlling*, which is when they exert pressure or condition behaviour toward specific outcomes, or (ii) *autonomy-supportive*, which is when they encourage the process of choice (Deci & Ryan, 1987).

Coordination practices at the micro-level may resemble those at the macro-level, especially in the case of high-profile projects, in large localities or hosting important population groups (e.g., migrants, former guerrilla fighters, etc.) that attract large numbers of donors. However, it is important to go beyond formal organisational structures and discover informal relations that make things work, how stakeholders share information or other resources and carry out joint actions (Honadle & Cooper, 1989). Some practices might be revealed from common discourses expressed by project staff, beneficiaries and other stakeholders. In such cases, it is relevant to distinguish whether they were delivered or instructed by the project (with top-down logic) or were jointly searched and generated by participants (Ellerman, 2006).

Accountability with respect to outcomes is better assessed at the micro than at the macro level. Existing local political and institutional arrangements determine whether, once the project is completed, the project outcomes will be sustained. The quality of these outcomes depends on the capacity of individuals to exercise voice and influence the behaviour of project staff and aid agencies, so that the latter have the incentives to offer what people really need and to provide what they offer (Easterly, 2006a; 2006b). Empowered local actors are the most motivated to sustain a positive change.

- *How to understand a project's logic*

We propose three steps to elicit the 'full' (explicit and implicit) project logic:

1. Knowing the project logic stated in the logical framework and other project documents;

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[8] According to the self-determination theory, the degree of 'relative autonomy' (Ryan & Deci, 2006) depends on how people understand their motives to act. People can internalise a condition through identification when they value the group goals and accept them as personally important. They can internalise it through integration when they fully assimilate those values and consider them as congruent with their selves (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72-73).

2. Identifying the specific activities carried out during the project cycle, who decided about changes to the original design, why and under which circumstances; and

3. Investigating the *practices* that evolved over time, as result of the interaction of individuals with project staff and other actors in the multilevel structural contexts.

Practices and relations, not only logframes and planned activities, should be the focus of any project assessment because a change process is not caused merely by a design. Change is pursued, lived and felt by individuals who negotiate goals, experience conflicts or reach agreements while seeking to exercise their autonomy in their specific circumstances.

A project's full *de facto* logic is jointly constructed – by project participants, project staff, formulators and other stakeholders. As such, the project logic should be discovered and reviewed through several channels during the project cycle so that changes in interpersonal relations and entitlements are traced over time. Hence, opportunities as well as challenges for project operational effectiveness, such as punctual interferences or high administrative workload (cf., Hirschman, 1967), could be identified and opportunely addressed.

Box 1 describes the use of focus group discussions (FGDs) during a fieldwork study to understand the implicit logic of four aid projects.

Box 1: Focus group discussions to understand the implicit logic of projects

Focus group discussions (FGDs) are a suitable tool to understand practices and life changes as project participants feel them. However, the existence of double hermeneutics (i.e., the participants themselves interpret the facts, and the researcher interprets their interpretations) requires that we search for alternative explanations recurrently as our own presuppositions could affect data analysis. Quantitative analysis can complement a primarily qualitative analysis to triangulate data, produce complex data and explore alternative hypotheses.

A fieldwork study in four project sites in Nicaragua and El Salvador included FGDs with project beneficiaries. Formal community leaders and non-leaders were contacted separately so that each group felt reasonably free to speak their minds. The protocol of the FGDs with leaders included questions related to the history and the micro-level context of the communities in order to cross-check baseline information. It also included a group ranking of the effects of the specific project in the community (cf., Alkire, 2002; Roche, 1999/2004) that fuelled discussion and the clarification of causal theories implicit in the project.

The FGDs with non-leaders started with a discussion on individual life experiences before and after the project that indirectly covered some elements of autonomy. Afterwards, we made use of:

- *Group listing* of project features, as an initial step to help participants reflect jointly. They listed positive and negative effects, classified in categories freely defined by them;

- An *individual scoring exercise* about four variables associated to autonomy: information, self-confidence, opportunities and decision-making. The exercise fostered discussions about whether the project influenced changes in those aspects and also produced quantitative data.

- *Group listing* of elements of a 'strong' community and recommendations for future projects. The objective was to gain awareness of the current situation and reflect upon whether something had changed in the community because of the project or other events.

In each FGD, participants had the opportunity to engage in preliminary analysis regarding impacts and lessons learned. These analyses were compared across groups. Although the protocol was the same for all non-leader groups, some probes allowed participants to develop their arguments and elucidate their perceptions regarding the results from the first groups. This strategy supported an interpretive analysis that emerged from each focus group, modified by the next group, and sequentially and progressively tested/verified during the course of the study (Billson, 1991; Narayan, Petesch & Shah, 1999).

Source: Muñiz Castillo (2009)

We propose that this tool be used at several points of the project lifespan to monitor practices and participants' motivations (cf., Schischka, 2006) so that necessary adjustments to the explicit project logic and informal relations can be introduced, leading to more support for individual autonomy. Given that the conception of autonomy used gives a crucial role to structural contexts, it is preferable to obtain perceptions of autonomy and change which are contextualised (in personal interaction) instead of methods that consider only one-shot opinions.

Project practices affect the definition of entitlements to resources delivered by projects. They are also are crucial to the mechanisms behind certain effects, and can explain the emergence of unintended or unexpected effects, whose analysis escapes the scope of logframes as traditionally used. FGD participants can identify and explain the outcomes after elucidating the mechanisms that work or not in their particular contexts (Pawson & Tilley, 2000; Leeuw, 1999).

However, group dynamics and pre-existing power relations could make the voice of the most powerful prevail in those public spaces (Cooke & Kothari, 2004). Therefore, findings from focus group discussions (FGDs) should be contrasted to findings from individual interviews and other data sources.

Next we present an assessment matrix that can support the analysis of broader project effects, based on a combination of methods.

4.2   Effects on autonomy as a combined capability: an assessment matrix

Any project means a change, at least temporary, in the lives of the participants. A project brings its own organisational culture and functional structure. Project staff (not necessarily from only one organisation) may hold values and promote social practices different from the local ones, with different effects on aid recipients. Contextual factors in interaction with project factors can explain change.

We propose that evaluators look at changes in the determinants of individual autonomy (section 2.1) and examine whether these changes were primarily driven by the project or other factors, by analysing thoroughly the full project logic. In conceptual terms:

1. A project could change the entitlements at individual and community level;

2. A project could support agency, primarily individual competence capacities, through an improvement in health conditions, intellectual skills, and so on;

3. Self-confidence (at the individual level) and organisational capacity (at the community level) could also be fostered or undermined *depending* on the quality of the participation and cooperation of individuals within community organisations; and

4. The structural contexts could change, for instance, if power relations are affected as a result of a redistribution of resources and decision-making.

Table 2 presents an assessment matrix to assist the analysis of changes and their causes. The analysis behind the matrix does not lead to focus on one effect, but stresses several influences on the main determinants of autonomy. The matrix requires not only that project practices are identified and their implications analysed, but also that their processes of formation are understood.

Table 2: Assessment matrix of project effects on the determinants of autonomy

| (i) Determinants of autonomy | PROJECT LOGIC | | ACTUAL EFFECTS | |
	(ii) Hypotheses on effects	(iii) Expected conditions	(iv) Actual situation	(v) Assessment of effect
-Entitlements -Agency (inc. self-confidence) -Structural contexts (e.g. communal organisation, social capital)	Intended and unintended impacts based on the project 'full' logic.	Assumptions and outputs that are explicit and implicit in project logic.	Actual conditions or change in conditions (vs. expected conditions) related or not to the project.	-Yes/no, partial -Short or long-term -Sustainable, at risk (vs. hypotheses)

The matrix shows:

i)   The determinants of autonomy (i.e., entitlements, agency, and contexts) that could have been affected as result of the project according to its explicit and implicit logic;

ii) The tentative hypothesis related to the effects (intended or unintended) on these determinants expressed as potential benefits (and disbenefits) of the projects;

iii) The conditions that would explain changes in those elements, based on planned processes and expected material outputs, and the implicit assumptions for their fulfilment;

iv) The actual situation in terms of determinants of autonomy; and

v)   The evaluator's judgement about how the actual situation compares to the hypothesised situation thanks to the project, and to the situation before the project and the situation without the project.

This assessment matrix is complementary to and more relevant than the logframe matrix (section 3.1). The latter may lead evaluators to focus on one effect, expected to be produced by a *linear causality* chain and project managers to focus on quantitative targets. In contrast, our matrix is more flexible and acknowledges the fact that certain project practices, outputs and structural contexts could have *different* (not necessarily positively correlated) *effects* on each determinant of individual autonomy. The focus is on the mechanisms of change, not on the magnitude of change – regardless of whether changes in some determinants, such as morbidity rates or causality orientation scales, can be measured. (One could also write a logframe matrix, in which autonomy is placed as overall goal; see section 4.4 below. However the logframe is not well suited for describing complex causation.)

Since the effects are of diverse nature, a combination of data collection and analysis methods is required. Some quantifiable indicators provided by official statistical offices, health posts, schools or project progress reports can be used regarding changes in living conditions that affect agency. Questionnaire survey data can inform about participants' personal experiences during the project and perceptions and attitudes toward their community.

Box 2 describes different data sources that can be used to analyse a project case. However, causality has to be explored via qualitative analysis methods in order to capture what really matters to beneficiaries and the meanings and interpretations that they form. This is particularly important to explore the subjective elements of autonomy (the feeling of being autonomous). For instance, self-confidence, which supports the initiation of autonomous action, depends on the existence of supportive external contexts and personal factors. Given that the analysis relies on the evaluator's own judgement, he or she should consciously look for the inclusion of multiple data sources and different perspectives.

Following Patton (1987) and Yin (2003), data collected and analysed by each project should be kept in a case study database. To study four aid projects in Nicaragua and El Salvador, Muñiz Castillo (2009) included:

1. Project fact sheet: basic information about the project sites; official project data including financial information, organisation charts and logical frameworks; a timeline with key activities; and other relevant information such as comparable projects, reported problems and expected results;
2. Fieldwork general material: Organised field notes (e.g., with details like local words, stories of towns), diaries or journal of activities, summary reports per case, photographs, and others;
3. Public documentation: maps, local development plans, laws, media articles, etc.;
4. Project documentation: formulation and evaluation reports, progress reports and statistics, videos, and training manuals;
5. Tabular material: survey data (two datasets), statistics, counts, individual scores of impacts, etc.;
6. Archival records of interviews and FGDs: audio-cassettes, literal transcripts or summaries when no audiotape was recorded, observation notes, list of participants;
7. Process records: minutes of FGDs including flipcharts and drawings, (coded) narratives, analytical charts and personal records, structured transcripts; and
8. Physical artefacts: monographs (e.g., school research study, history of the village), promotion and educational material, etc.

After having an assessment of autonomy as a capability, the next step would be to examine whether individuals exercised it during the project. Not all decisions are relevant and, hence, not all decisions reflect an exercise of autonomy. Moreover, it is hard to find a causal link between having made relevant decisions during a project and being able to make such decisions later in community issues, as local contextual factors will have a higher weight in the second case.

4.3   The exercise of autonomy during a project: the role of values

Evaluating whether there has been an exercise of autonomy requires, first, *the explicit identification of goals and values* that may change over the project cycle as result of the interaction of local people with other actors (value endogeneity). Project formulators, implementers and evaluators have to be aware of this unintended influence, so that they consciously aim at understanding local cultures and needs. Moreover, individual motivations for certain behaviours, including participation in projects, must be explored.

In practical terms, it is necessary to identify those processes valued by project participants.[9] In parallel, one must identify *the extent of choice* possible to be exercised by them – choice refers to the existence of relevant and affordable alternatives. In the case of complex projects, we need to identify *priority* processes and to define needs for training or supervision *with* local people so that they can be better involved, taking into account their latent and current capacities.

People want to be *involved in valued processes* either directly (via participatory tools) or through leaders (when they are representative and respected); the balance partly depends on cultural features. If people are not involved, these processes and activities will be considered conditions that restrict their autonomy, even though the final output was aimed to expand their entitlements. Motivation could become extrinsic and, furthermore, there could be a 'motivational spill-over effect' (Ellerman, 2006, p. 46), if this

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[9] People may value certain processes for different reasons, such as the expected outcomes or the processes themselves. For instance, some people working in sanitation campaigns can be motivated by a true interest in their health and environment, while others might be driven by the joy of working with their peers and visiting new places. In both cases, the motivation is intrinsic (Ellerman, 2006, p. 37). In terms of the self-determination theory, the first case reflects the internalisation of an extrinsic motivation.

impossibility to be involved in valuable matters related to the project extends to other community or personal spheres.

The effects of projects on the *feeling* of being autonomous vary across individuals depending on their degree of individual *involvement* in valuable project processes and the achievement of the goals related to such processes. Moreover, the higher the involvement, the lower the weight that people give to external causes of success or failure in achieving goals. Table 3 presents some possible cases, which are explained in the text that follows.

Table 3: Looking at empowerment and participation in projects (possible cases)

	Via valued processes	Via non-valued processes
Goals are achieved	Empowerment (objective and subjective)	Awareness of positive effects. May lead to empowerment.
Goals are not achieved	Negative effect on autonomy causality orientation.	Lower but still negative effect on autonomy causality orientation.

When project participants take part in valued processes:

a. If they were successful in reaching goals, they can be empowered in objective and subjective terms; or

b. If they failed, they can feel strongly harmed in their autonomy causality orientation because they committed themselves to a failed initiative.

In contrast, when project participants take part only in non-valued processes:

c. If the project was successful to reach that goal, they first would gain awareness of unexpected positive effects. If their values changed, they could feel empowered.

d. If the project failed, they could be (only) mildly harmed in subjective terms because they could reason that, as they knew in advance, the effort was not important in the first place.

It is worth noting that individual goals are not necessarily the same as project goals. When these goals differ, the success to reach project goals with the participation of the intended beneficiaries in (non-valuable) processes could harm perceived agency when people were coerced, while the failure to reach those goals could lead to subjective empowerment if beneficiaries aimed at making the project to fail. For instance, non-leaders could reject a project seen as only suitable to leaders and, in this way, try to weaken their power.

Project participants have to be involved in examining the project effects, during the project cycle, so that their goals and values are better integrated. In this way, they could engage with intrinsic motivation in crucial processes and the intended effects, if achieved, would be more valued and sustained.
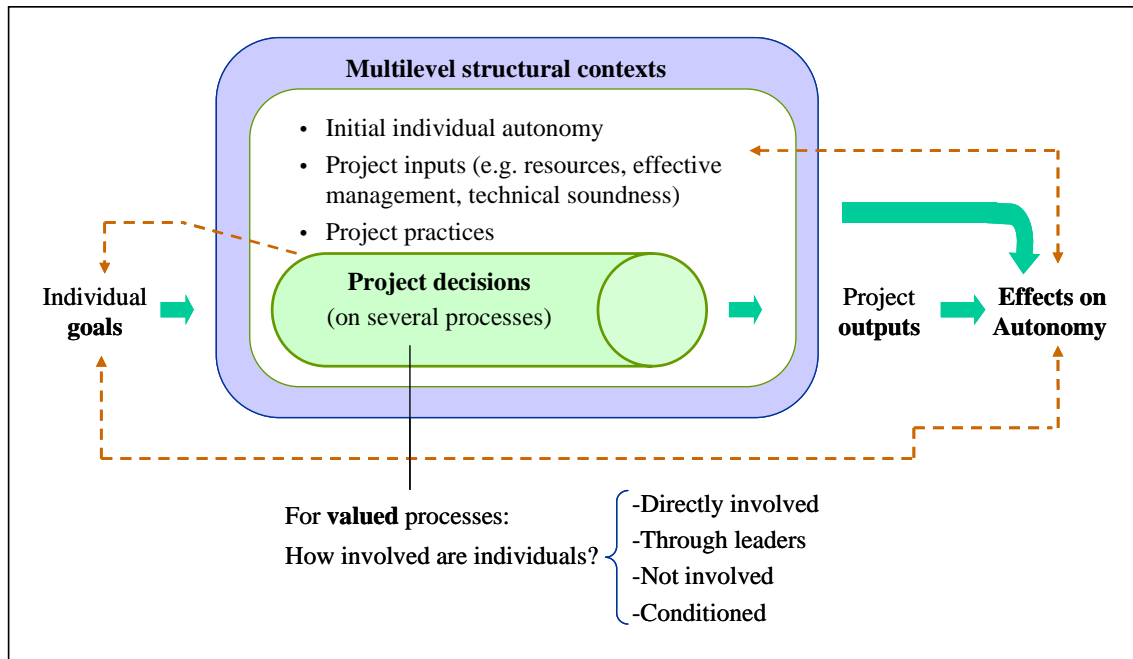
4.4 The complete analytical framework

Figure 4 presents a complete analytical framework for project evaluation, design and management. This framework incorporates some aspects of the logframe (section 3.1) because it looks at the inputs, outputs and outcomes of a project; however, the outcomes now are in terms of individual autonomy.

Another crucial difference is the focus on *individuals as agents of change*, not on projects designed to produce change or even on change in people's behaviours. The emphasis is on practices and relations, not only on activities and expected outputs. This is be-

cause aid recipients interact with project staff and act intentionally in multilevel structural contexts thus affecting change and the processes of change.

Figure 4: An analytical framework of project effects on individual autonomy

Multilevel structural contexts

- Initial individual autonomy
- Project inputs (e.g. resources, effective management, technical soundness)
- Project practices

Project decisions
(on several processes)

Individual goals

Project outputs

Effects on Autonomy

For **valued** processes:

How involved are individuals?
- Directly involved
- Through leaders
- Not involved
- Conditioned

Projects should be designed in a way that responds to the needs of the intended beneficiaries in congruence to their values. Such projects have to be operationally effective (i.e., to provide the expected outputs) so that aid recipients can fulfil their needs related to health, sanitation, education, security, and so on. Then, it is necessary to identify *how well endowed* a project is to reach its stated objectives and which their inputs are: availability of resources, existence of effective management, a committed staff, the suitability of the technical solution chosen and its implementation, and so on (Riddell et al., 1995).

Operational effectiveness can have two main effects: (i) a *direct* effect on entitlements via the provision of social infrastructure (e.g., water plant, communal house, school, etc.) and on agency through personal competence (e.g., enhanced work and organisation skills, better health status, and physical security), and (ii) an *indirect* effect on causality orientation and self-confidence, when participation in the project is rewarded with the achievement of the goals for which people have worked. In addition, the immaterial benefits related to social capital (i.e., increased trust and solidarity) spread out when the project is effective but shrink when it is not (Hirschman, 1984).

The framework conceptually integrates the three possible channels how projects could influence individual autonomy. First, it looks at the effects on the determinants of individual autonomy that the different project intermediate elements (practices, processes, relations) and project outputs could have (section 4.2) so that it stresses that the effects on autonomy depend on *how* the project is carried out, which affect behaviours. Second, it looks at processes valuable or important to project participants and the quality of their participation in decisions related to these processes (section 4.3).

Third, it shows an 'action chain' that starts with individual goals and that ends with effects that are evaluated with regard to these goals. Following the criterion of human autonomy effectiveness (section 3.3), the focus should be on the priority goals.

Complex influences on the determinants of individual autonomy

Several non-project factors influence the determinants of individual autonomy. For instance, actual *entitlements* to resources made available by aid projects might even decrease if, for instance, elites concentrate these resources, undermining trust, with a deep negative impact on the causality orientation of other community members. Building partnerships with local people in the presence of power imbalances is a sensitive issue. In some cases, project staff could *facilitate* the participation of otherwise excluded people who already possess a motivation to improve their lives. Project staff's role would be to identify intrinsic motivation and support local efforts.

There are reinforcing and opposite influences because some practices might support one determinant of autonomy while constraining another. For instance, when projects include self-construction activities, long work hours could assure a prompt delivery of outputs but undermine the self-confidence of project participants or their entitlements to other resources, if project participants are mistreated or hindered from working in their own affairs. Therefore, it is important to identify the synergic satisfiers (Max-Neef et al., 1991) that support more than one relevant factor contributing to individual autonomy, without restricting others. Project staff has to cultivate special abilities and to have the right incentives so that they can channel local expectations and initiatives successfully during the project cycle, making the necessary design adjustments.

For instance, in our water case, the design included the construction of a reservoir to water livestock. However, during the project execution, community leaders planned and started a business of raising tilapias. They connected the reservoir to a gravity water system, bought fry and obtained donations as well. In this way, they planned to support their local economy. This flexibility to adapt the original design to the local needs was evidenced in a matter that was important for residents, in which leaders (in representation of other community members) exercised autonomy and enrolled project staff in their 'project'. Unfortunately, external factors harmed its sustainability. It is worth noting that the construction of the reservoir was the last project activity; such flexibility emerged as result of actors' interactions over the project. It was not a usual attitude for project staff at the start of the project.

A deeper understanding of contexts can lead to autonomy-supportive practices

The framework explicitly addresses both the initial situation in terms of autonomy (pre-project situation) and the multilevel structural contexts.

On the one hand, the previous experiences of autonomy of project participants affect their interactions, project practices and their effects. This implies that project planners and managers have to understand the local cultural and institutional context, the project participants' livelihoods and aspirations, and 'to find where positive change is underway on its own to address pressing problems' (Ellerman, 2004, p. 163) in order to support this change[10]. They have *to respect* the change process of project participants, *not to impose value*s that are 'accepted' only as result of conditionality (i.e., incorporated in formal practices but not internalised), and to *encourage the internal efforts to exercise voice* (Appadurai, 2004).

On the other hand, multilevel structural contexts have effects on individual autonomy directly or through project practices; likewise, contexts can be affected by project elements. This means that a project replicated in other locations might well have different

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[10] Livelihoods are the combinations of many activities that people deploy to make up a living (Chambers, 1995).

effects. Therefore, the assumptions about contexts should be explicit in the logical framework of the projects. These considerations add complexity to the issue of attribution because the interactions between structural contexts and project practices might explain different individual effects. The case to use mixed analysis methods becomes stronger.

The analysis of the contexts is sometimes avoided so that so-called 'good practices' are spread with disregard for specific circumstances (cf., White, 2005). Even worse, a controlling context in which an organised elite can assure the success of a project (in terms of material outputs) has sometimes been seen as desirable, without considering the goals of those who are not part of the elite. Thus, different contexts are more or less *supportive to promote autonomy* and more or less *supportive to promote other goals*. Any classification of contexts requires *a previous definition of priority goals* in order to evaluate later how the context, which evolved around the project, contributed or not to the realisation of such priorities. Even assuming a consensual prioritisation, certain 'new' priorities could be imposed during the project by means of controlling (i.e. control-oriented) practices (in contrast to autonomy-supportive practices; Deci & Ryan (1987), see section 4.1). For instance, administrative controls to comply with tight deadlines could be interpreted by project staff and other participants as if tangible outputs are more important than positive effects on human lives. The assessment matrix (section 4.2), by looking at the implicit and explicit logic of the project, facilitates the identification of these 'hidden' priorities.

We propose that it is necessary (i) to consciously select autonomy-supportive practices that promote choice and trust among participants (cf., Ellerman, 2006), something rather marginal in international aid, and (ii) to facilitate the internalisation of conditions that are necessary for public policy reasons. For instance, for water projects in rural areas, home sanitation systems are required because they reduce the land contamination by grey waters, so public water companies oblige people to build their sanitation systems before being connected for the first time to the water service. Likewise, reforestation and soil conservation activities protect the watersheds and are usually included in project designs. Residents need to understand *why* those systems and activities are important and not feel that they 'have to do as told' to secure the water connection at home. Otherwise, the project effects will not be sustainable.

Controlling practices such as obligatory long and harsh workdays in self-construction activities, if undertaken, should be combined with respectful treatment and clarity in the definition of entitlements. However, as much as possible, these controlling practices should be avoided as they could externalise the motivation. Looking at our water project case, at first, villagers might work in the reforestation activities for the welfare of their community and also receive a minimum payment. However, if they become too busy to do anything else because new tasks appeared and they accepted because they were paid to do so, they could have felt that they worked for others and not for themselves.[11] In the future, they would be less likely to participate in similar activities without payment. After some time, many participants remembered that those activities were 'a waste of time and money by part of the project' as they are not concerned about those activities anymore. People own a project when its activities reflect their genuine motivation, not necessarily when they work in everything related to the project.

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[11] The project included the construction of a water system, small home sanitation systems, latrines and ecological woodstoves and a reservoir, and many reforestation and soil protection activities. Households attended training workshops and carried out cleaning campaigns throughout the project.

Participation does not assure individual empowerment

Participation has usually been considered the means for empowerment.[12] However, participation can make a project riskier. In terms of operational effectiveness, the project can be very successful or very unsuccessful. This observation is more striking in the case of aid projects that rely on an organised community to carry out construction or supervision activities. If the project was successful, participation would be seen as a cause or a facilitator for the success and people would be willing to participate again in future endeavours, independently of the quality of participation.

A failure in reaching valued outcomes has a larger psychological impact (via its influence on causality orientation) when the individual is involved in the process than when he or she is not involved (section 4.3). Furthermore, if the failure follows a sequence of continuous failures, it could slowly deactivate one's capacity to aspire because the felt links between aspirations and outcomes would loosen (Appadurai, 2004, p. 68).

Nonetheless, people perceive certain reasons for failure, whether these are a drought, the misappropriation of resources by leaders or an executing NGO, an inefficient project management, the lack of flexibility in project design, or robberies. When reasons for failure outside the project are easily identified, the negative impact of failure on individual autonomy would be lower. This means that *causality orientation is the link between participation and empowerment*. This link is very fragile and subjective, although it has concrete foundations: project effectiveness and involvement in the project. Participation leads to empowerment when people are self-motivated and involved in valued processes of a project that achieves valued outcomes.

5 Conclusions

This paper has presented a framework to analyse whether and how aid projects are human-autonomy effective, based on their effects on individual autonomy. It means that the focus is on individuals as agents of change, not projects designed to produce change for individuals (section 4.4).

The main conclusions of this study are:

- Individual autonomy can be promoted through (i) an improvement in the determinants of individual autonomy: entitlements, agency and structural contexts; (ii) the exercise of autonomy during the project cycle; and/or (iii) the achievement of personal goals. However, following the human autonomy effectiveness criterion, an expansion of autonomy should not contract other valuable capabilities, which could result from pursuing every personal goal (section 3.3). Therefore, we propose to primarily look at the determinants of individual autonomy and the exercise of autonomy in regard to valuable project processes.

- Operational effectiveness can promote an expansion of autonomy via the provision of expected outputs; however, greater emphasis should be on practices and relations (section 4.1), which can explain the mechanisms behind unintended effects on human lives, beyond what was framed by project designers.

- To analyse the exercise of autonomy during a project could shed light on short-term empowerment (section 4.3). However, in the long-term, the causal links between having made relevant decisions during a project and being able to make such deci-

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[12] See, for instance, Cooke and Kothari (eds., 2004) and Hickey and Mohan (eds., 2004) for several cases that illustrate positive and negative sides of 'participation'.

sions later in other relevant issues can loosen, as local contextual factors will have a higher weight in the second case. The key aspect is that we need to identify which life aspects individuals most value and evaluate whether they are able to decide on them. This exercise should be done before and after the project, but it is complex as values can change over time.

- To apply this framework, we have to: (i) understand the project participants' previous experiences of autonomy and goals, which will influence their behaviours and motivations during the project; (ii) identify project inputs, practices and contexts that explain the conditions in which a project is carried out; and (iii) analyse project decisions and valued processes. This exercise for four infrastructure projects was carried out in Muñiz Castillo (2009).

- Likewise, project planners and managers have to understand the livelihoods and aspirations of project participants, respect their change process, not impose values that are 'accepted' only as result of conditionality, and encourage participants' efforts to exercise voice (section 4.4). This implies, for instance, that some adaptations to the original design of a project should be possible during the implementation.

- Participation leads to empowerment when people are self-motivated and involved in valued processes of a project that achieves valued outcomes (section 4.4). The challenge is to identify and promote involvement that implies a certain exercise of autonomy and clearly differentiate it from, for instance, participation as enforced workload.

A step toward fostering more autonomy-supportive practices in international aid is to raise awareness of the intended and unintended effects and their mechanisms. The analysis of case studies incorporating the evaluation criterion of human autonomy effectiveness, in different contexts, can support this aim (Muñiz Castillo, 2009; Muñiz Castillo & Gasper, 2009). Moreover, projects so focused could lead to more horizontal relationships between aid recipients and funders toward the achievement of valued goals, with thereby greater chance of sustained positive effects on human development.

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2009

No.	Author(s)	Title
001	Roelen, K., Gassmann, F. and C. de Neubourg	Child Poverty in Vietnam - providing insights using a country-specific and multidimensional model
002	Siegel, M. and M. Lücke	What Determines the Choice of Transfer Channel for Migrant Remittances? The Case of Moldova
003	Sologon, D. and C. O'Donoghue	Earnings Dynamics and Inequality in EU 1994 – 2001
004	Sologon, D. and C. O'Donoghue	Policy, Institutional Factors and Earnings Mobility
005	Muñiz Castillo, M.R. and D. Gasper	Looking for long-run development effectiveness: An autonomy-centred framework for project evaluation

2008

No.	Author(s)	Title
001	Roelen, K. and F. Gassmann	Measuring Child Poverty and Well-Being: a literature review
002	Hagen-Zanker, J.	Why do people migrate? A review of the theoretical literature
003	Arndt, C. and C. Omar	The Politics of Governance Ratings
004	Roelen, K., Gassmann, F. and C. de Neubourg	A global measurement approach versus a country-specific measurement approach. Do they draw the same picture of child poverty? The case of Vietnam
005	Hagen-Zanker, J., M. Siegel and C. de Neubourg	Strings Attached: The impediments to Migration
006	Bauchmüller, R.	Evaluating causal effects of Early Childhood Care and Education Investments: A discussion of the researcher's toolkit
007	Wu, T., Borghans, L. and A. Dupuy	Aggregate Shocks and How Parents Protect the Human Capital Accumulation Process: An Empirical Study of Indonesia
008	Hagen-Zanker, J. and C. Azzarri	Are internal migrants in Albania leaving for the better?

| 009 | Muñiz Castillo, M.R. | Una propuesta para analizar proyectos con ayuda internacional: De la autonomía individual al desarrollo humano |
| 010 | Wu, T. | Circular Migration and Social Protection in Indonesia |

2007

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001	Notten, G. and C. de Neubourg	Relative or absolute poverty in the US and EU? The battle of the rates
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010	Muñiz Castillo, M.R.	Autonomy and aid projects: Why do we care?

2006

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004	Notten, G. and D. de Crom-brugghe	Poverty and consumption smoothing in Russia

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