



Measuring impact in Nepal's media market system

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INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Private sector development programmes face an ever-growing pressure to report on their results. Over the past decade, there has been a commendable push from practitioners and policymakers alike to get better at impact measurement, leading to the creation of frameworks such as the DCED Standard. The application of this framework has done much to generate rigorous evidence on the causal connections between what we did and what was achieved in a pragmatic way: taking into account context-specific constraints of available time, resources, and expertise. Importantly, this has recognised that rigour is not the preserve of any one research design, that all methods are biased in different ways, and that any inference we make about causality will always be an approximation. We have, in short, realised that just because we can't get to the 'great', it shouldn't stop us telling a story about impact using the 'good enough'.

Estimating attributable change – the 'counterfactual' for the outcomes that would have happened anyway without the programme intervention – has always been the trickiest part of impact measurement. Attribution is simplest where causal chains are short; influencing factors few, and the environment controlled.

To-date, almost all of the published impact assessment reports and case studies have been from agriculture; in particular, relating to benefits from new business models serving Bottom of the Pyramid customers (e.g. seed packets) or integration into lead firm value chains (e.g. contract farming).

However, such success comes with a downside risk: that the sheer number of examples of applications in agriculture could raise one particular 'set' of attribution methods, suitable for commodity sectors only, above others. If non-agriculture sectors cannot use these same methods or have to innovate or compromise on the accepted level of rigour due to the nature of their sectors – they become a game for methodological criticism¹. At worst this could lead to reductivism, where projects will avoid entering non-traditional sectors (which may conversely be more systemic in nature and therefore lead to high impact returns) because they are more difficult to measure, cannot attribute change based on the agricultural blueprint, and therefore cannot report any results.

We see signs of this risk being realised. A recent paper prepared for the DCED on measuring attribution, for example, synthesised case studies to draw up a decision tree to select appropriate attribution methods. These cases, however, were all based on interventions in agricultural sectors. Accordingly, the methods in the decision tree are all 'large n', mainly quasi-experimental and survey-based– with no theory-based or small 'n' (e.g. contribution analysis) techniques considered². This may reflect current practice, but we believe that projects should be assessed not against the practice of others, but against the original framework intent. After all, as the DCED guidance states:

“In the complex world of private sector development, attributing outcomes to activities can be extremely challenging. However, the DCED Standard proposes that programmes should make every effort to clarify the link. Whether it is called 'attribution' or 'contribution', programmes should make as strong a case for this link as they can, to demonstrate that their project is really having an impact”³

The purpose of this paper is to broaden the knowledge-base about credible methods to estimate attributable change. It is based on the case of Samarth-NMDP's work in the media market system in Nepal. The paper starts by giving a brief overview of information constraints facing smallholder farmers, and the intervention run by Samarth-NMDP. It then sets out the programmes' attribution strategy and how this was implemented. It analyses a few challenges and ends by concluding that, since the strength of the Standard is a practical approach to measurement that does not condemn projects to ignorance in the name of rigour, or create perverse incentives to avoid work in 'hard to measure' sectors, then a more diverse set of examples of methods that can be considered 'good enough' to measure, attribute and report on impact would be beneficial⁴.

¹ Including in formal audit processes against the DCED Standard

² See <http://betterevaluation.org/approaches> and http://betterevaluation.org/resources/overview/attribution_cause-effect_impact_evaluations

³ http://www.enterprise-development.org/wp-content/uploads/4_Implementation_Guidelines_Attribution_March_13.pdf

⁴ See http://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---ifp_seed/documents/briefingnote/wcms_335698.pdf

MEDIA SECTOR OVERVIEW

Access to effective information is a foundation for decision making in all business, even the smallest. Investment, marketing, and technical decisions need to be based on an understanding of the prevailing market and an understanding of the potential options available. The lack of effective information is, therefore, a critical constraint to all businesses. It is particularly a constraint to farmers and rural micro-enterprises that operate in information-poor environments where many information channels are ineffective, inaccessible or unaffordable.

The use of mass media to link rural enterprises and farmers to the market and other key market players not only offers an improved flow of information to increase performance but also potentially offers channels through which rural communities and businesses can voice their concerns and issues. Development of the agricultural sector through the use of mass media, thus, possesses potentials for growth and development of the pro – poor population.

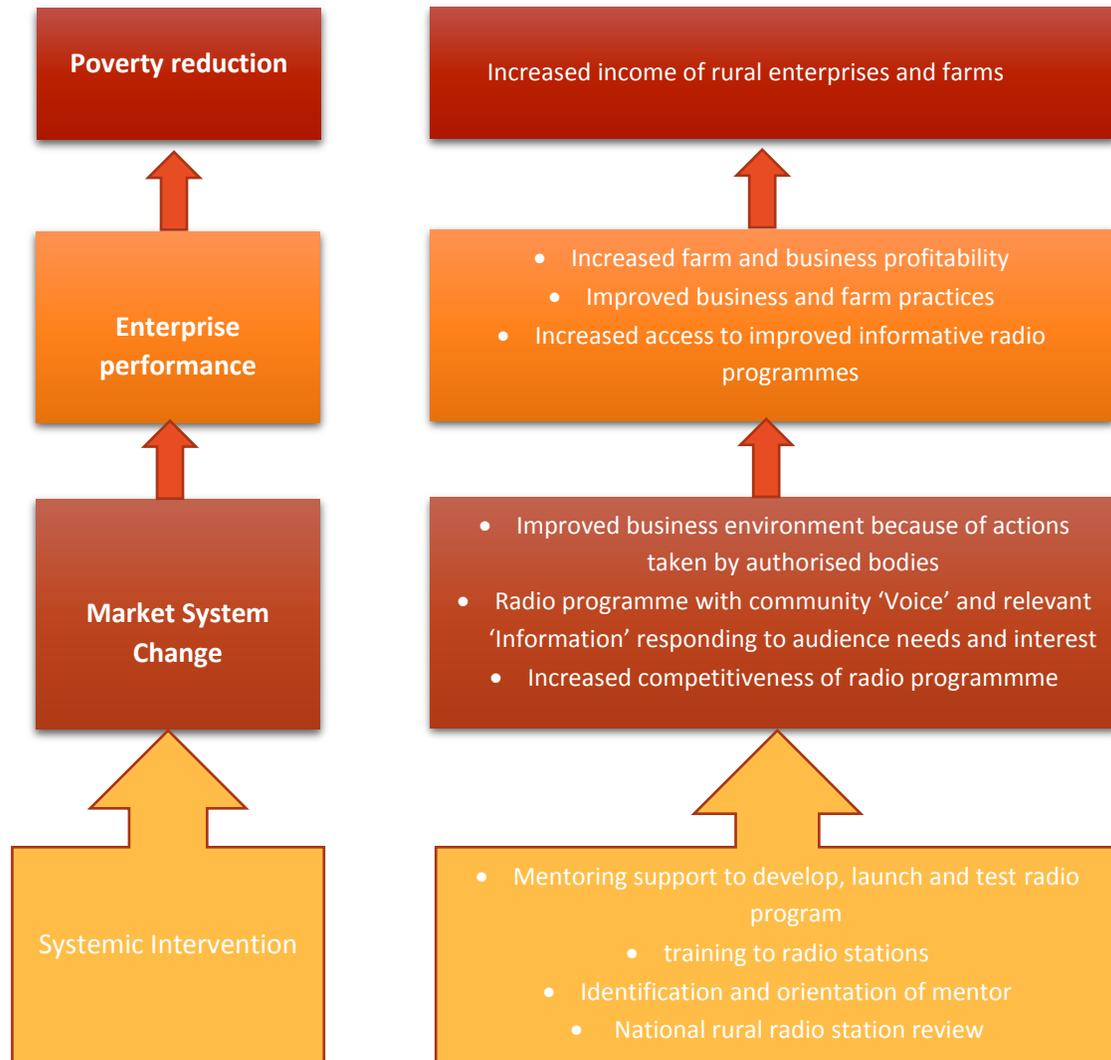
MEDIA INTERVENTION: RADIO PROGRAMMING IN AGRICULTURE AND SMALL BUSINESS

The radio sector in Nepal is recognized as having some major constraints. Despite its large size (there are around 369 radio stations across Nepal), the radio sector is weak with low profitability and program quality. While there are agricultural radio programs operating in Nepal, many are reliant on sponsorship and highly influenced by sponsors (pay to play). The lack of investment is resulting in programs that rely on single sourcing (single experts), lack a field based focus and are therefore top-down driven rather than being driven by the needs of the audiences themselves.

The Samarth-NMDP intervention strategy for media recognizes the need to address these key weaknesses as well as focus more directly on informative radio programming. The intervention strategy, therefore, focuses on:

Pilot programming in agriculture and small business by supporting the development, testing and launch of sustainable programming focused on agriculture and small business. This intervention partnered with a small number of more successful radio stations to pilot improved business models for radio stations so that they produce agricultural and small business programs which, later on, can become models for wider replication. In the early stages of the intervention, the partner radio stations were stifled by a lack of profitability but now the radio stations are interested in continuing the program regardless of external support as the program has been able to garner the advertisement and is popular among respective communities.

Figure: Overall impact framework of the intervention



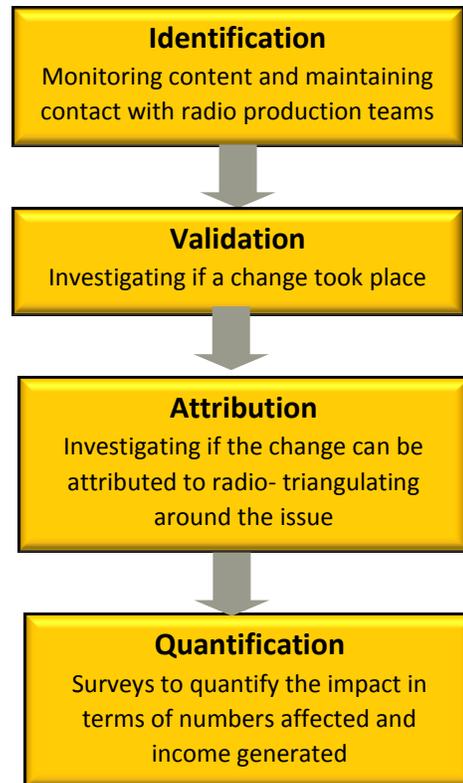
ATTRIBUTION STRATEGY

Measuring the changes brought about by the intervention is important to inform stakeholders about the credible impact generated by the intervention. However, measuring the attributable impact of an intervention could be too complex and often farfetched where there are too many influencing factors to trigger the desired result. Likewise, establishing a causal link between changes among beneficiary groups because of listening to the radio program is usually weak as there could be a multitude of factors to result in this change.

Hence, it is noteworthy to mention that Samarth does not measure “Media Effects”, that means the changes in knowledge, attitude, and behaviours of radio listeners. More specifically- *“The field of media effects can be characterized as having a strong micro orientation, in that the unit of analysis is typically the individual media user, and the focus is on the relatively narrow question of whether exposure to a particular media message impacted that user’s attitudes, beliefs, cognitions, or behaviors”*⁵

Samarth’s strategy explores the broader changes brought by the radio discussion/debate to address the immediate public/policy concerns. It adopts a 4-step approach to impact identification and measurement. This involves media content monitoring to identify the issues emerging from the programs that have been covered in a way that have a potential for bringing about change. An investigation and monitoring are then undertaken to validate if the change actually took place. If a change did take place then the attribution is assessed by ‘triangulating’ around the issue (getting at least 3 independent and distinct groups to give their perspectives) to understand how the change came about and what role radio played in this. This explores why the issue was not solved before the radio coverage and what role radio played in bringing about the change. A key informant group (e.g. government bodies) at this attribution stage are those that brought the change about and understanding their motivations and actions. If attribution can be proven to radio, the final step in the process is to undertake a quantification of the impact by undertaking focused studies on the change to establish the number of people impacted on and the scale of benefit.

4 steps impact identification and measurement process



STRATEGY IN ACTION

The impact identification and measurement process are illustrated by taking two examples of how the radio content/debate put pressure on authorised bodies to take immediate actions on the pertinent issue resulting in benefits to farmers. These examples not only illustrate how the media impact can be measured pragmatically but also demonstrate the potential of a radio program to be a catalyst for change and therefore a driver of impact on the livelihoods of poor farmers.

Example 1: Advocacy on the release of rice pricing in South Western Nepal

⁵ MEASURING MEDIA IMPACT AN OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD-PHILIP M. NAPOLI

In South Western Nepal, also known as the rice basket of the country, a large number of smallholder rice farmers were unhappy with the prices they were receiving for their crop. They felt forced to sell their paddy at a price which they believed barely covered production costs.

The middlemen purchasing and stockpiling the rice believed that they were shouldering the risk of lack of clarity about national and regional prices, so they offered lower prices, citing this risk. The ones to lose the most were the poorest farmers who neither had the facility to store their paddy nor the cash reserve to pay back loans they had received to plant the crop.

Farmers knew what was causing the problem: One of the biggest buyers in the rice market was Nepal Food Corporation (NFC) that purchased significant quantities of rice for food security purposes. The NFC, a government agency, plays a vital role to influence the prices of crops but usually declares the prices late every year, when most farmers would have already sold their crop. The farmers wanted NFC to announce their buying price as early as possible to give them greater bargaining power.

It was this situation that Krishnasar FM (one of the radio stations supported by Samarth-NMDP to produce field-based agricultural radio program) found when investigating problems around the rice prices through field-based investigation. The radio station gave a platform to the farmers to highlight the issue through participative programming and organized an on-air debate among farmers, the NFC and the District Agriculture Office (DAO). The NFC recognized the problem and announced the price of crops for Banke and Bardia districts one month earlier than the previous year, in the program itself.

This radio content was shortlisted by the project team (sector team and results measurement team) as a high priority to explore impact – the project team maintains the radio content log and categorises content based on their likelihood to generate impact. Further, this episode was also communicated by the radio presenter to the Media sector team as it would benefit paddy farmers, in their view. The project team traveled down to the district to validate and assess the role of a radio program on the announcement of paddy price a month earlier than usual.

They interacted with paddy traders, the District Agricultural Office and the NFC themselves. The role of radio was clear to trigger the decision for a timely announcement of the price. They also conducted two focus group discussions with farmers. As per the interaction with paddy farmers and traders, they estimated the quantity of paddy traded during the period (from the day of the announcement to time of the usual price announcement); the average quantity sold during this period; and the additional price gained by paddy farmers as a result of the timely price announcement.

Variables considered to estimate impact

- Total traded quantity (quintal) affected by announcement =X
- Average quantity (quintal) traded per household=Y
- Total number of benefitting household=X/Y
- Total amount benefitted per farmer = X *Additional price per quintal after price announcement

Altogether, 5028 households⁶ were able to increase their income by NRs 4576 each.

Example 2: *Radio restores the farmer's right to irrigation*

Irrigation is the basic prerequisite to productive farming. Access to seed and appropriate fertilizer alone cannot yield effective outputs without the access to irrigation facilities. Gaurijung VDC (Village Development Committee, a local government body) located in the far south Western Region of Jhapa lies far from the district headquarters. Agriculture has been the major source of income for the people residing in this VDC. The Lower Kishni Khola Irrigation Facility is their only source of water for irrigation during the dry season. The irrigation facility was constructed in 1996 by the Government of Nepal in association with Asian Development Bank which gave irrigation access to 1500 hectares of land.

After the irrigation canal was damaged in a flood during the 2013 monsoon, the farmers were not able to cultivate enough off-seasonal crops due to the lack of irrigation facilities. Farmers, especially the ones who had less than one hectare of land were affected as they not only lost their income but also had to buy crops from the market due to limited harvest.

The program presenters (of the radio station supported by Samarth-NMDP) found out about the situation and the farmers' concerns while visiting to investigate local issues. The program presenters conducted two focus group discussions (FGDs) with the District Irrigation Office in the presence of the Irrigation Consumer Committee and representatives of the farmers which was aired on the radio program. The radio program continuously followed up the issue in subsequent episodes and the irrigation consumer committee also kept on pressurising; as a result, the irrigation office released Rs. 1.2 million to repair the canal.

The case was validated by speaking to the irrigation consumer committee, farmers and the District Irrigation Office. The farmers/committee members cited that the radio programme helped by putting pressure on local and district irrigation authorities. The District Irrigation Office also recognized the role of the radio and stated that they want the media to continue bringing issues to the surface and keep on putting pressure to concerned authorities as a watchdog.

Variables considered to estimate impact

- Total land used for crops before and after restoring irrigation facility
- Total production and sales volume of crops before and after restoring irrigation facility
- Market price
- Number of farmers using restored irrigation facility

To assess the benefit to the farmers by restoring the irrigation facility, the project team conducted a mini survey which not only proved that the irrigation dam was repaired because of the joint pressure of the radio program and irrigation consumer committee but also how they benefitted from access to an irrigation facility.

The survey was done using a retrospective method where respondents were asked to recall the situation during the damage and after the repair. There is a clear indication that yield of major crops was increased after repairs of the

⁶ 1 male and 1 female beneficiary per household as per their involvement in paddy farming as verified by focus group discussion.

irrigation facility resulting in increased income. In total, 925 households benefitted with an additional income of NRs. 20,765 each from growing off-seasonal crops due to irrigation.

CHALLENGES

The content of audience-led programming by nature cannot be pre-defined so the possible changes to be brought by radio programs vary depending on the pertinent community issues explored by the radio program. In most of the cases, the observed changes could not be attributed to the radio program as the external influencing factors were larger than the radio program's contribution. In a few cases, the related authorities are hesitant to verbalize the contribution of the radio program to cause the observed change despite the fact that they bring issues into notice; create a dialogue and follow it up regularly until the action is taken. Due to this low success rate⁷ for attributing changes to the radio program, there is reduced motivation for project staff to investigate prospective impacts.

Robust content monitoring enables project staff to identify the promising cases which are likely to deliver impact, however, it is time and resource demanding to monitor the weekly content of 5 different radio programs with the same rigour. Lapses in content monitoring have meant some strong cases may have been missed.

CONCLUSION

It's undeniable that media plays a vital role to improve conditions of farmers and rural micro-enterprises. However, measuring its impact is not as straightforward as an agriculture value chain programme where the anticipated change is generally predictable, hence, it is unfeasible for this intervention to plan the attribution strategy as per a decision tree.

The measurement strategy used by Samarth-NMDP only captures a fraction of the impact triggered through the community debates/discussions initiated by the intervention supported radio stations. However, the programme doesn't wish the impact to go unnoticed because of the stereotype of media being a difficult to measure sector or needing a large survey to credibly assess impact. Samarth-NMDP has tested a pragmatic approach to measuring impact triggered by radio debate/discussion which has a causal connection with the observed change.

This method emphasises analysing the role of the radio program to result in the change by interacting with multiple stakeholders and using mini-surveys, to validate and evaluate the benefits which beneficiary groups have realised.

⁷ So far, only two cases have been attributed and quantified.