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Article

PROJECT IMPACT ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORKS IN NONPROFIT DEVELOPMENT: A REVIEW OF CASE STUDIES FROM SOUTH ASIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews and critically analyzes project impact assessment frameworks employed by nonprofit development organizations across South Asia. Drawing upon diverse case studies from countries such as India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, the study identifies patterns, best practices, and limitations in existing evaluation methodologies. It investigates how local contexts—social, economic, and political—influence the design and effectiveness of these frameworks. These frameworks, while offering structured tools for planning and accountability, often emphasize upward reporting and quantifiable results over local ownership, contextual adaptability, and long-term social change. Drawing on 41 empirical studies published between 2000 and 2022, this review systematically examines the methodological approaches, stakeholder engagement levels, institutional capacities, and technological adaptations shaping impact assessment practices in nonprofit development across South Asia. *The findings reveal several critical insights. First, the dominance of externally imposed evaluation models has reinforced hierarchical power relations, marginalizing grassroots knowledge and limiting community participation. Second, while participatory and feminist evaluation frameworks are acknowledged in theory, their actual application remains limited, often constrained by organizational capacities and donor priorities. Third, although many organizations prefer mixed-methods approaches to balance rigor and contextual sensitivity, challenges such as resource limitations, insufficient training, and reliance on external consultants hinder their consistent implementation. Additionally, the study finds that evaluations are often conducted for compliance purposes rather than to support organizational learning and adaptive programming. Institutional constraints—particularly in smaller organizations—continue to limit the sustainability and effectiveness of internal monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems.*

KEYWORDS

Nonprofit Evaluation; Impact Assessment; South Asia Development; Project Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E);Case Study Review;

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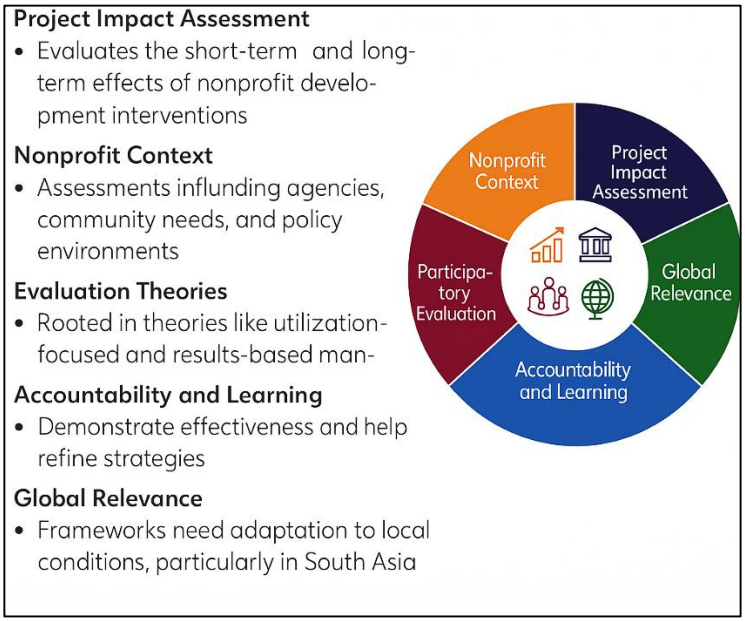
INTRODUCTION

Project impact assessment in nonprofit development refers to the systematic process of evaluating the short-term and long-term effects of development interventions implemented by nonprofit organizations (O'Faircheallaigh, 2010). It encompasses the measurement of outputs, outcomes, and ultimate impacts that a project generates in relation to its stated objectives (Hartley & Wood, 2005). The distinction between monitoring and impact assessment is critical—while monitoring tracks the implementation process, impact assessment seeks to determine the causal effect of an intervention. In the context of nonprofit organizations, these assessments are often influenced by funding agencies' requirements, community needs, and policy environments (Bond & Morrison-Saunders, 2011). Moreover, such frameworks often incorporate both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to ensure comprehensive data capture. Conceptually, impact assessments are rooted in evaluation theories such as utilization-focused evaluation (Meex et al., 2018), theory-driven evaluation, and results-based management (RBM). These paradigms aim to link inputs and activities to measurable and attributable changes within target populations. For nonprofits, impact assessments play a dual role of accountability and learning, enabling organizations to demonstrate effectiveness and refine future strategies (Nieuwenhuijsen et al., 2018). Increasingly, frameworks also integrate participatory evaluation models that foreground stakeholder engagement and empowerment, ensuring that the voices of beneficiaries are central to the evaluative process. This is particularly vital in complex development contexts, such as South Asia, where sociopolitical, cultural, and economic variables intersect to shape project realities.

Figure 1: Integrated Framework for Project Impact Assessment in Nonprofit Development



Globally, nonprofit organizations are key actors in humanitarian aid, sustainable development, education, healthcare, and gender equity (Duinker & Greig, 2007). Their interventions span across continents, necessitating robust evaluation mechanisms to assess impact and justify resource allocation. In recent decades, multilateral agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, and various bilateral donors have emphasized the use of standardized impact assessment frameworks for funded projects. These frameworks often draw from logical frameworks, theory of change models, and OECD-DAC evaluation criteria. Globally accepted criteria—relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability—form the bedrock of these evaluations, helping ensure comparability and replicability across different development settings (Snell & Cowell, 2006). The increased demand for transparency and accountability in nonprofit work, particularly among donors, has led to the institutionalization of impact assessment processes within organizational operations. Moreover, international NGOs and foundations now leverage data analytics, geographic information systems (GIS), and digital surveys to enhance their evaluative capabilities (Weston, 2011). This global turn toward rigorous and

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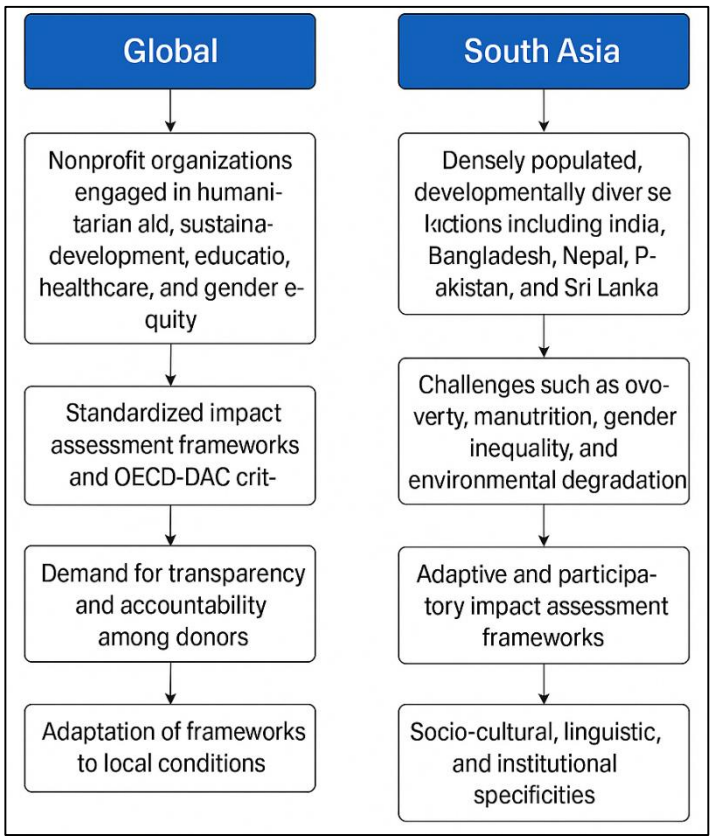
evidence-based assessment has also seen an upsurge in cross-sector collaboration, where governments, private sectors, and civil society coalesce in program implementation and evaluation. Importantly, the applicability of global frameworks must be adapted to local conditions—cultural norms, language, governance structures, and resource constraints—in order to yield meaningful insights. This is especially pertinent in South Asia, where diversity and disparity demand contextually grounded methodologies.

Figure 2: Comparative Flowchart of Global and South Asian Nonprofit Evaluation Contexts



South Asia, home to over 1.8 billion people, comprises some of the world's most densely populated and developmentally diverse nations, including India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The region faces persistent challenges such as poverty, malnutrition, gender inequality, and environmental degradation. In response, thousands of local and international nonprofit organizations operate across various sectors, playing a critical role in service delivery and advocacy (Taylor et al., 2004). These organizations often work in resource-constrained and politically sensitive environments, necessitating adaptive, inclusive, and rigorous impact assessment frameworks. While government evaluation systems may lack capacity or neutrality, nonprofit entities fill the void through grassroots-level monitoring and participatory evaluation mechanisms. The rise of philanthropic funding, corporate social responsibility (CSR) mandates, and multilateral aid has further increased the accountability demands placed on South Asian nonprofits(Mueller et al., 2018). Notably, several indigenous frameworks have emerged to reflect local epistemologies and community dynamics. However, the heterogeneity in organizational capacity, access to technology, and governance quality within the region poses significant challenges for uniform assessment practices. This necessitates a nuanced approach that acknowledges the socio-cultural, linguistic, and institutional specificities of South Asian contexts while aligning with international standards (Roy et al., 2012). This objective is grounded in the recognition that development effectiveness increasingly hinges not only on outcomes achieved but also on the transparency, equity, and contextual relevance of evaluative practices. By documenting both the successes and the shortcomings of existing frameworks, the study aims to generate evidence-based insights that can inform organizational learning, strategic planning, and policy advocacy. A particular focus is placed on the challenges

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nonprofits face in aligning donor expectations with ground-level realities—such as reconciling results-based management with participatory evaluation principles. Through the comparative analysis of case studies, the objective also includes identifying institutional, methodological, and cultural variables that influence framework selection and implementation. Ultimately, the study aspires to contribute to the discourse on development evaluation by offering a region-specific perspective that bridges theory and practice, and by proposing recommendations for strengthening impact assessment approaches in complex, resource-constrained environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on project impact assessment within the nonprofit development sector reveals a rich interplay between theoretical advancements, methodological debates, and contextual applications. As nonprofit organizations continue to play an increasingly central role in development efforts across the Global South, the need for robust, adaptable, and participatory evaluation frameworks has intensified. The scholarly discourse spans a range of domains, from development studies and evaluation theory to political science and organizational behavior, offering diverse perspectives on how nonprofit interventions are planned, executed, and assessed for effectiveness. Within this growing body of literature, South Asia presents a compelling regional focus due to its complex socio-economic dynamics, vibrant civil society, and increasing donor engagement. Impact assessment is conceptualized not simply as a technical procedure for measuring outcomes, but as a political and social process that involves negotiating stakeholder interests, navigating donor expectations, and addressing local realities. Scholars have explored a variety of evaluation paradigms—ranging from logical frameworks and theory of change models to participatory and utilization-focused evaluations—each carrying its own assumptions and implications for practice. Simultaneously, case-based studies from South Asia illustrate both innovations and challenges in adapting these global models to local contexts marked by poverty, caste hierarchies, political instability, and infrastructural constraints. This literature review aims to systematically examine key themes in the academic and applied literature, drawing attention to seminal works, empirical findings, and region-specific contributions that collectively inform the understanding of nonprofit impact assessment in South Asia. The review is organized into specific thematic categories that highlight conceptual foundations, global methodologies, stakeholder-centric approaches, and South Asia-specific practices, ultimately setting the groundwork for the case study-based analysis that follows.

Impact Assessment in Nonprofit Development

Impact assessment in nonprofit development is a complex, multifaceted process that serves both accountability and learning functions. At its core, impact assessment refers to the systematic process of measuring the changes—both intended and unintended—produced by a development intervention over time (Lee & Nowell, 2014). While some scholars emphasize its role in demonstrating effectiveness to donors (Hodge & Piccolo, 2005), others underscore its value in internal organizational learning and strategic refinement. Foundational evaluation theories offer a range of conceptual tools for understanding impact. Utilization-focused evaluation prioritizes the needs of decision-makers in using findings, while theory-driven evaluation attempts to unpack the causal pathways through which change occurs. Results-Based Management (RBM) frameworks, promoted by multilateral donors, emphasize outcomes, outputs, and performance indicators to assess the efficacy of programs (Eckerd & Moulton, 2010). At the same time, alternative paradigms, including participatory and feminist evaluations, challenge the technocratic assumptions of conventional assessments by emphasizing context, equity, and the co-construction of knowledge. Critics of mainstream approaches argue that they often prioritize donor interests over community voices, thereby risking metric-driven reductionism (Cairns et al., 2005). Realist evaluation, as introduced by Moore (2000), presents a middle path by asking what works, for whom, and under what circumstances. This aligns closely with the dynamic and uncertain nature of development work where linear cause-effect models often fall short (Hossen & Atiqur, 2022; Moore, 2000a). Additionally, scholars such as Sawhill and Williamson (2001) and Sowa et al. (2004) have examined how institutional constraints—such as funding, technical skills, and organizational culture—shape the design and implementation of impact assessments. Together, these perspectives offer a rich, layered understanding of the theoretical terrain that underpins nonprofit evaluation practices.

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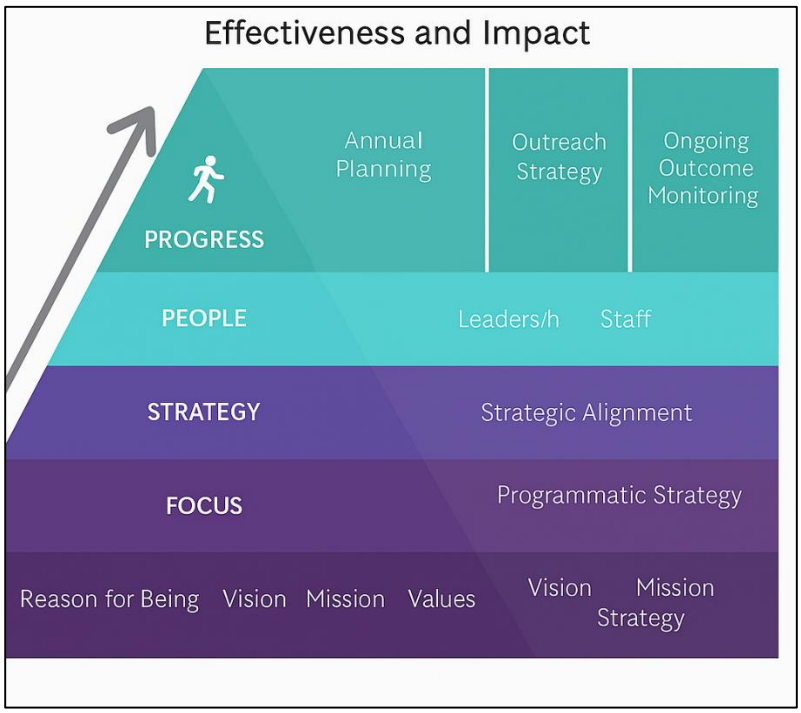
Figure 3: Hierarchical Model of the Nonprofit Impact System



Methodologies employed in nonprofit impact assessment range from rigorous experimental designs to flexible, participatory approaches, each with distinct strengths and limitations. Randomized Control Trials (RCTs), championed by development economists and institutions such as the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), have been widely adopted for their ability to establish causality (Ritchie & Kolodinsky, 2003). These designs have provided robust evidence on interventions in health, education, and microfinance. However, scholars such as Benjamin (2012) and Carman and Fredericks (2008) caution that RCTs often lack contextual sensitivity and may not capture long-term or systemic effects. In contrast, qualitative and mixed-methods designs are better suited to capturing nuanced, community-level insights. Participatory methods such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and community scorecards have been extensively used in nonprofit development projects across South Asia to engage beneficiaries and democratize the evaluation process. These approaches are particularly valuable in contexts marked by social inequality and marginalization, where traditional evaluation tools may fail to reflect local realities. Organizational dynamics also play a critical role in shaping how evaluations are designed and used. (Frumkin, 2005) argue that learning-oriented organizations are more likely to institutionalize evaluation findings into their decision-making processes. However, resource limitations, short donor timelines, and fragmented data systems often hinder effective implementation, particularly in resource-constrained nonprofits. Furthermore, issues of power and control—such as donor dominance in defining indicators—can compromise the relevance and authenticity of findings. These challenges underscore the need for adaptive, context-sensitive frameworks that balance methodological rigor with practical feasibility and ethical considerations. The literature consistently emphasizes that impact assessment is not merely a technical task, but a deeply institutional and political process embedded in broader relationships of accountability and trust.

Evaluation Theory in Development Practice

Evaluation theory in development practice has evolved significantly over the past five decades, reflecting broader shifts in the goals, actors, and epistemologies of development interventions. Traditionally rooted in positivist traditions, early evaluation approaches prioritized linear logic models, measurable indicators, and technocratic accountability frameworks (Moxham, 2009). These models often emphasized "goal-based" evaluations focused on whether predefined objectives were achieved. However, as the complexity of development contexts became increasingly apparent, scholars began advocating for theory-driven approaches that examine the causal mechanisms

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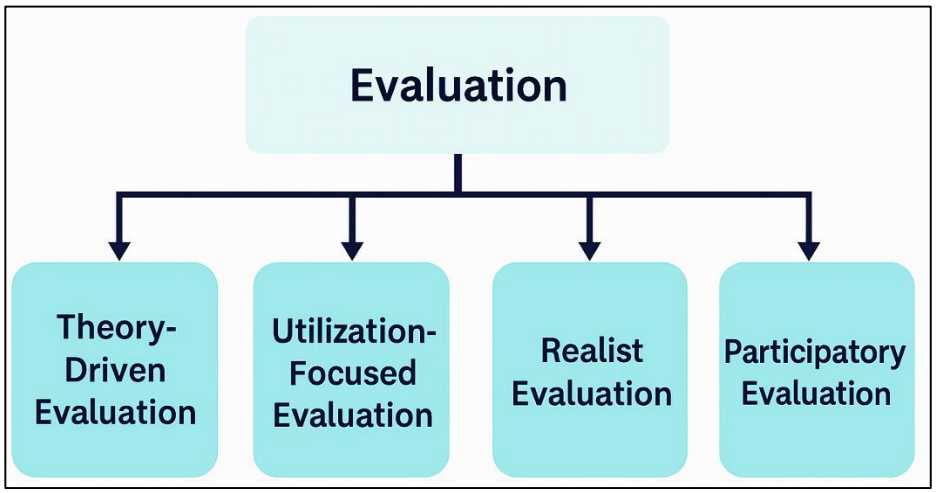
underlying change (Moulton & Eckerd, 2011). Theory of Change (ToC) models, for instance, emphasize the articulation of assumptions, pathways, and preconditions that link interventions to outcomes (Carroll & Stater, 2008).

Figure 4: Typology of Evaluation Theories in Development Practice



In the global South, particularly within nonprofit sectors, such models help navigate the challenges posed by multidimensional poverty, entrenched social hierarchies, and volatile governance environments. Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE), developed by (Kaplan, 2001), represents a major paradigm shift by foregrounding the information needs of intended users and promoting the practical application of findings in programmatic and strategic decisions. This approach is particularly relevant in development settings where limited resources necessitate actionable and timely feedback (Guo & Acar, 2005). Realist Evaluation, advanced by Barman (2007), further challenges universalistic assumptions by asking: "what works, for whom, under what circumstances?"—an essential question in culturally and institutionally diverse regions like South Asia (Cutt & Murray, 2000). Other scholars have emphasized the role of Participatory Evaluation, which democratizes knowledge production and centers stakeholder perspectives, especially those of marginalized communities (Herman & Renz, 2008). These shifts reflect growing recognition of the epistemological plurality in evaluation practice, where power relations, local context, and cultural norms must be taken seriously. Despite efforts to integrate such inclusive and adaptive frameworks, evaluation theory in development remains contested, particularly when donor-driven accountability frameworks overshadow reflexive, learning-based approaches. Nevertheless, the theoretical richness emerging from diverse models continues to inform more equitable, effective, and context-sensitive evaluation practices in nonprofit development worldwide.

Global Frameworks of Evaluation

Global evaluation frameworks have evolved to respond to the growing demands for transparency, accountability, and effectiveness in development aid and nonprofit programming. Central to this evolution is the institutionalization of structured evaluation models promoted by multilateral agencies, bilateral donors, and international NGOs. The Logical Framework Approach (LFA), one of the earliest and most influential tools, was developed by USAID in the 1960s and has since been widely adopted across development programs. It provides a matrix to define goals, outputs, outcomes, and indicators in a hierarchical manner, facilitating clarity in project design and monitoring (Van Slyke, 2006). The OECD-DAC evaluation criteria—relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability—further standardized global practices and became essential components of donor reporting systems (Dart, 2004). These frameworks are often embedded in Results-Based Management (RBM) systems that aim to strengthen evidence-based planning and decision-making (Jahan et al., 2022; Sowa, 2008). RBM links inputs and activities with short- and long-term results, aligning program operations with organizational performance expectations. International institutions such as the World Bank, UNDP, and DFID have institutionalized these approaches, shaping how evaluation is implemented globally. While the standardization of such tools facilitates comparability and compliance, critics argue that they often reinforce top-down

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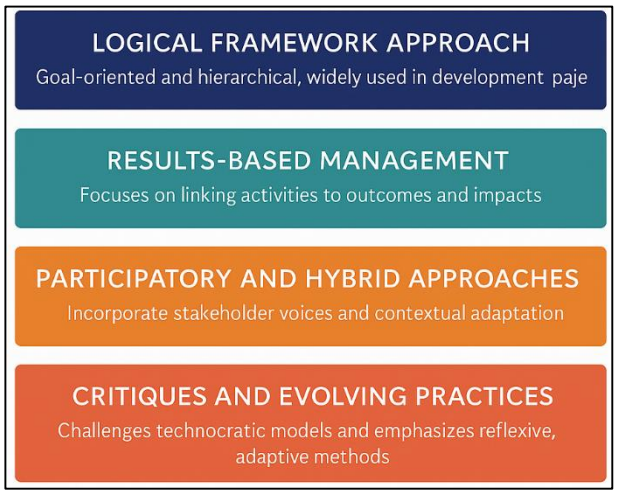
accountability mechanisms and limit space for contextual learning. Nonetheless, these global frameworks remain dominant in international development and nonprofit sectors, functioning as both operational instruments and symbolic commitments to transparency.

Figure 5: Sequential Flow of Global Evaluation Frameworks in Development Practice



The implementation of global evaluation frameworks across different sociopolitical contexts has highlighted the challenges and opportunities of standardization in development practice. While tools like LFA and RBM provide clarity and consistency, their application in diverse and resource-constrained settings often reveals underlying limitations. For instance, the rigid, linear assumptions embedded in logical frameworks frequently fail to accommodate the complexity, non-linearity, and emergent nature of social change in low-income or conflict-affected regions (Baruch & Ramalho, 2006). Furthermore, overly prescriptive evaluation designs can exclude local knowledge systems, marginalize community voices, and reduce learning to metric-driven compliance. In response, evaluators and development organizations have sought to hybridize global models with more flexible and participatory tools that foreground stakeholder agency and adapt to contextual nuances (Froelich, 1999). This has been evident in organizations operating in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, where community-based scorecards, outcome mapping, and theory of change frameworks are integrated with DAC criteria to create pluralistic models of evaluation (O'Regan & Oster, 2002). Such hybrid approaches enhance local ownership while maintaining donor credibility, although they often require more time, facilitation skill, and institutional openness (Chavesc et al., 2004). Moreover, new approaches such as developmental evaluation have emerged to address situations of high uncertainty and innovation, prioritizing real-time feedback and learning over summative judgments (LeRoux & Wright, 2010). These evolving practices demonstrate that while global evaluation frameworks provide essential scaffolding for accountability, their meaningful application depends on contextual adaptation, critical reflexivity, and inclusive practice. Despite their institutional dominance, global evaluation frameworks have faced sustained critiques from scholars and practitioners who challenge their epistemological assumptions, power dynamics, and practical consequences. One major critique is their technocratic bias, which privileges quantitative indicators, standardized metrics, and expert-driven processes over context-sensitive, participatory, and narrative-based methods (Greenway, 2002). Such models, while efficient for upward reporting to donors, may sideline the perspectives of communities and frontline workers, leading to evaluations that are formally rigorous but substantively hollow (Kara et al., 2004). Additionally, scholars have interrogated how evaluation tools often function as instruments of control within the global aid regime, reinforcing donor agendas and depoliticizing development processes (Poole et al., 2000). This critique aligns with broader concerns within postcolonial and feminist development theory, which call for deconstructing whose knowledge counts and who decides what constitutes "impact" (Poole et al., 2000). In response to these concerns, reorientations in evaluation theory and practice have emphasized values such as empowerment, equity, and epistemic justice. Innovative frameworks like Realist Evaluation (Lee & Nowell, 2014) and Outcome Mapping (Hodge & Piccolo, 2005) attempt to shift the focus from static indicators to dynamic processes and relational

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outcomes. Additionally, there has been growing advocacy for reflexive practice in evaluation, where practitioners actively interrogate their positionality, assumptions, and methods. These trends reflect a broader movement within the evaluation community to reclaim the developmental dimension of evaluation—to not only measure change but to contribute meaningfully to it through inclusive, adaptive, and locally grounded methodologies.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Community Scorecards

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and community scorecards represent significant methodological innovations in development evaluation, aiming to democratize the assessment process and center community voices. Originating in the late 1980s and popularized, PRA was developed in response to top-down planning processes that often excluded the perspectives of rural and marginalized populations. Grounded in principles of empowerment, localization, and mutual learning, PRA encompasses a variety of tools such as resource mapping, seasonal calendars, ranking exercises, and transect walks, enabling communities to articulate their needs, priorities, and perceptions (Cairns et al., 2005). It challenges the hierarchical nature of conventional evaluation by emphasizing horizontal relationships between facilitators and participants. Scholars have noted its transformative potential in reshaping knowledge production by valuing experiential and indigenous forms of understanding (Moore, 2000b; Akter & Razzak, 2022). As the participatory movement gained traction, community scorecards emerged in the early 2000s as a complementary method, particularly in monitoring public service delivery. Pioneered in countries like India, Uganda, and Bangladesh, scorecards involve citizens directly in evaluating the quality, accessibility, and responsiveness of public services, often through facilitated dialogue with service providers. Unlike PRA, which is diagnostic, scorecards are more action-oriented, aiming to generate real-time feedback and institutional accountability. Both tools are situated within a broader discourse of participatory governance, where evaluation is not merely a tool for measurement but also a mechanism for empowerment and civic engagement. Their adoption by NGOs, international donors, and governments reflects a growing recognition of the need to shift from technocratic assessments to citizen-centered development approaches that are culturally embedded and socially responsive.

While Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and community scorecards have been widely adopted in development practice, their implementation presents a complex interplay of opportunities and challenges. Empirical studies from South Asia have documented the widespread use of PRA in NGO-led initiatives addressing livelihoods, water management, and health. These tools are credited with fostering collective problem-solving, enhancing local ownership, and providing a culturally appropriate medium for engagement (Cairns et al., 2005). Similarly, community scorecards have been institutionalized in governance frameworks by local governments and development partners to improve service delivery transparency and responsiveness (Hodge & Piccolo, 2005). In Madhya Pradesh, India, and Bangladesh's social accountability projects, scorecards facilitated measurable improvements in maternal health services and school performance (Eckerd & Moulton, 2010; Khan et al., 2022). However, studies also point to implementation challenges such as elite capture, facilitator bias, and tokenistic participation that undermine the inclusive ideals of these methods. The success of PRA and scorecards often depends on the quality of facilitation, the institutional environment, and the extent to which findings are acted upon (Cairns et al., 2005; Masud, 2022). Moreover, the sustainability of such participatory tools remains uncertain in contexts of weak governance, donor fatigue, and limited follow-up mechanisms. Another critique concerns the instrumentalization of participation, where donor agencies adopt participatory tools to legitimize projects without genuinely devolving power or decision-making authority. Despite these concerns, evidence suggests that when genuinely embraced, PRA and community scorecards not only enhance evaluation quality but also contribute to broader goals of empowerment, accountability, and social justice. They shift the locus of evaluation from external experts to local actors, reinforcing the idea that development is most effective when communities are both the agents and evaluators of change.

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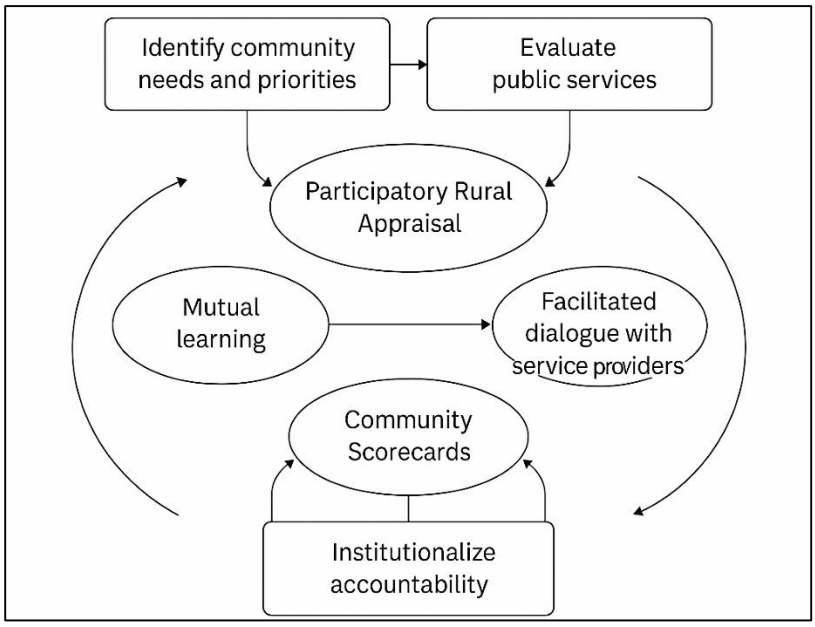
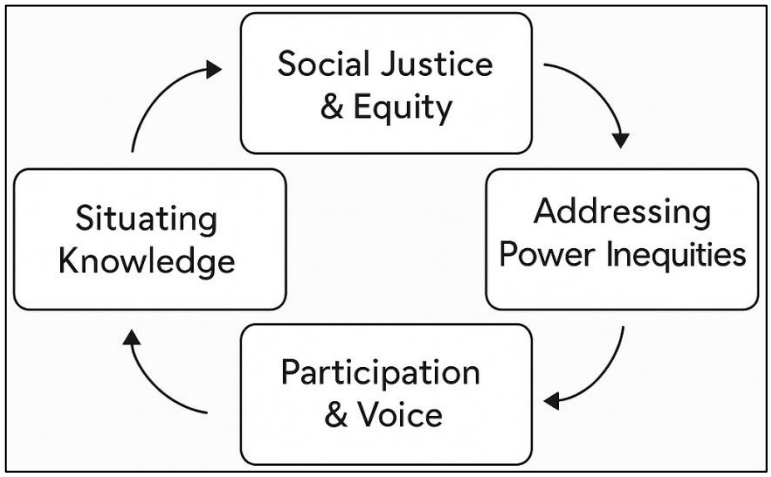
Figure 6: Participatory Evaluation Cycle: Integrating PRA Tools and Community Scorecards for Inclusive Development



Feminist and Transformative Evaluation Frameworks

Feminist and transformative evaluation frameworks emerged as a response to the epistemological limitations and normative biases of conventional evaluation practices, particularly those that overlook power relations, social inequalities, and intersectional experiences. Feminist evaluation is grounded in the core tenets of feminist theory, emphasizing the importance of gender justice, reflexivity, participatory methods, and a commitment to social transformation (Moore, 2000). These frameworks challenge positivist paradigms by asserting that all knowledge is situated and influenced by social context, power dynamics, and the positionality of the evaluator (Poister, 2003). Feminist evaluation promotes the inclusion of diverse and marginalized voices—especially women and gender minorities—as a central evaluative priority rather than an auxiliary concern (Sawhill & Williamson, 2001). Moreover, it critiques gender-blind evaluations that reduce complex social relations to technocratic indicators or outcome-based measures (Carman & Fredericks, 2008). Similarly, transformative evaluation, as articulated by Moxham (2009), aligns with emancipatory paradigms, incorporating principles of social justice, human rights, and cultural responsiveness. It views evaluation as a tool not only for measuring effectiveness but for dismantling systemic inequities by amplifying marginalized perspectives and facilitating institutional change. Both feminist and transformative evaluations advocate for methodologies that are participatory, dialogical, and iterative, drawing from qualitative traditions such as narrative inquiry, ethnography, and participatory action research. They also emphasize the ethical dimensions of evaluation—who benefits, who decides, and who is held accountable—raising critical questions about evaluator neutrality, stakeholder inclusion, and epistemic justice. As such, these frameworks reposition evaluation from a detached auditing exercise to an engaged, activist process with the potential to transform both practice and society.

Figure 7: Evaluation Framework for Inclusive Development Practice



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The application of feminist and transformative evaluation frameworks within development practice, particularly in the Global South, reflects an increasing recognition of the need to address intersectional inequalities and structural injustices through evaluative work. In regions like South Asia, where caste, gender, religion, and class intersect to shape development outcomes, feminist-informed evaluations have been used to interrogate how projects engage with, reproduce, or disrupt existing hierarchies. Empirical studies in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh have shown that when evaluations incorporate gender-sensitive tools—such as gender analysis matrices, storytelling, and life histories—they offer richer insights into community dynamics and power relations (Abdullah Al et al., 2022; Moulton & Eckerd, 2011). These approaches have been particularly effective in assessing programs related to gender-based violence, reproductive health, and women's political participation (Carroll & Stater, 2008). However, implementation is not without challenges. Feminist and transformative evaluations require skilled facilitation, long-term engagement, and organizational cultures that value reflection over compliance. Donor agencies and state institutions may resist these paradigms due to their political implications or perceived lack of standardization. Moreover, the participatory demands of these frameworks are often constrained by tight timelines, funding cycles, and rigid reporting structures. Yet, despite these barriers, the integration of feminist and transformative perspectives into evaluation practices continues to expand, driven by advocacy from feminist scholars, grassroots organizations, and human rights actors. In development contexts, these frameworks offer not only methodological tools but also ethical imperatives, encouraging evaluators to challenge injustice, deconstruct dominant narratives, and co-create knowledge with those historically excluded from decision-making processes (Kaplan, 2001). Consequently, feminist and transformative evaluations serve as vital contributions to an inclusive, accountable, and socially responsive development paradigm.

Power Dynamics in Evaluation Practice

Power dynamics in evaluation practice are deeply embedded in both structural and epistemic domains, shaping who defines success, whose voices are prioritized, and how knowledge is validated. Evaluations, particularly in development contexts, often reflect asymmetrical relationships between funders, evaluators, and beneficiaries (Huttunen, 1999). The structural power exercised by donors and international agencies frequently dictates the design, methods, and objectives of evaluations, reinforcing top-down accountability rather than promoting horizontal, community-based learning (Richardson, 2005). These imbalances are often reinforced through predetermined indicators, logical frameworks, and results-based management systems that prioritize upward reporting over contextual understanding. Furthermore, epistemic power operates in the privileging of certain types of knowledge—particularly quantitative, externally generated data—while marginalizing indigenous, experiential, or community-based understandings of impact. Feminist and postcolonial scholars argue that such hierarchies of knowledge perpetuate evaluator authority and undermine the potential for inclusive, co-produced evaluation processes (Hastie et al., 2020). The dominance of Western evaluation paradigms in the Global South is also critiqued for ignoring socio-cultural specificities and reinforcing epistemological dependency. Realist evaluation and participatory approaches have attempted to address these concerns by involving local stakeholders in identifying evaluation questions and interpreting results. However, even within participatory frameworks, power asymmetries may persist if participation is superficial or symbolic. Thus, understanding power in evaluation requires critical attention not only to institutional hierarchies but also to methodological choices and the discursive construction of knowledge.

Power relations in evaluation are not static but are actively negotiated through roles, representations, and relationships across the evaluation lifecycle. Evaluators often function as intermediaries navigating multiple accountabilities—to donors, implementers, and communities—each with divergent expectations and interests (Turner et al., 2007). This positionality creates complex tensions around whose voices are heard, how findings are framed, and to what ends evaluation is used. In development settings, particularly in regions like South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, researchers have highlighted how elite capture, gender hierarchies, and cultural biases influence who gets included in data collection and decision-making processes. Even well-intentioned participatory approaches may unintentionally replicate existing inequalities when facilitators fail to create truly safe and inclusive spaces. The act of "giving voice" through evaluation can become performative if it does not lead to actual redistribution of influence or benefits. Moreover, evaluators' own social identities—gender, race, class, and institutional affiliations—shape how they engage with

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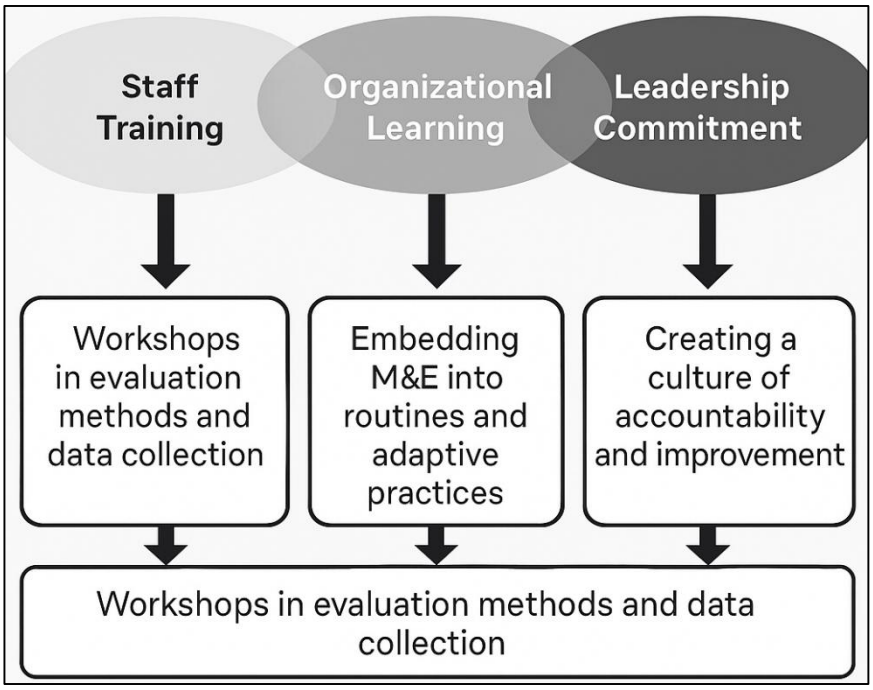
communities and interpret data. Power is also embedded in the dissemination of findings; evaluators may strategically emphasize or omit certain narratives depending on the intended audience or institutional pressures. Accountability mechanisms that prioritize donor reporting may sideline learning for local stakeholders or delay community feedback (Kara et al., 2004). Addressing these dynamics requires intentional reflexivity, transparent negotiation of roles, and a commitment to ethical engagement that values justice over compliance. Ultimately, evaluations are not neutral technical exercises but socially and politically situated practices that reflect, reinforce, or resist power

Building Internal M&E Capacities

The capacity to conduct meaningful monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in nonprofit development organizations depends significantly on internal institutional development, particularly in the areas of training, staff development, and organizational learning. As evaluation becomes a more central requirement for accountability and learning, nonprofit organizations must cultivate technical, analytical, and facilitation skills among staff at all levels (Cutt & Murray, 2000). Training initiatives, whether in quantitative methods, qualitative inquiry, or participatory evaluation, contribute not only to the professionalization of M&E personnel but also to a wider evaluative culture across the organization (Herman & Renz, 2008). In contexts where M&E units are traditionally under-resourced and viewed as ancillary to program functions, ongoing capacity-building efforts are crucial for integrating evaluation into strategic planning and program design. Studies have shown that investment in internal training programs can lead to increased ownership of evaluation processes, improved data quality, and greater utilization of findings for decision-making. Furthermore, fostering peer learning and mentoring among staff members helps institutionalize knowledge and reduce dependence on external consultants (Van Slyke, 2006). However, the effectiveness of training is contingent upon organizational readiness, staff retention, and supportive leadership. Without organizational structures that value critical reflection and feedback loops, training may become a one-off event with minimal long-term impact. Thus, building internal M&E capacities is not merely a technical endeavor but a multidimensional process that involves institutional commitment, resource allocation, and a learning-oriented culture.

Figure 8: Strategic Components for Building Internal Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Capacity in Nonprofit Organizations



Technological innovation has become an essential enabler of monitoring and evaluation practices, especially in nonprofit sectors operating in complex, low-resource settings. The use of mobile data collection tools, geographic information systems (GIS), dashboards, and cloud-based platforms has significantly improved the efficiency, accuracy, and timeliness of M&E functions (Sowa, 2008). These

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tools allow organizations to gather disaggregated data, visualize trends, and provide real-time insights for program adjustments. For instance, digital platforms such as KoboToolbox and CommCare have been widely adopted in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa to streamline field data collection and reduce dependency on manual processes. Moreover, the integration of technology into M&E systems facilitates participatory feedback mechanisms, allowing communities to report on service delivery through SMS surveys, mobile scorecards, and interactive voice response systems. This democratizes information flow and enhances accountability by making evaluative processes more transparent and inclusive. However, the adoption of technology in M&E is not without challenges. Infrastructure limitations, digital literacy gaps, and data security concerns can impede implementation, especially in rural or underserved regions (Baruch & Ramalho, 2006). Furthermore, technological solutions must be context-sensitive and aligned with organizational capacity to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities or producing data without actionable utility. The literature also warns against technological determinism, emphasizing that tools should serve broader evaluation goals rather than dictate them. Thus, while technology can enhance internal M&E capacities, its effectiveness depends on thoughtful integration with human systems, ethical safeguards, and an overarching commitment to using data for reflection, accountability, and adaptive learning.

Civil Society and Development Landscape in South Asia

Civil society in South Asia occupies a vital and complex role in the region's development trajectory, emerging from deep-rooted traditions of community-based organization, resistance to authoritarianism, and postcolonial nation-building. The historical evolution of civil society in the region has been shaped by anti-colonial movements, religious institutions, and social reform campaigns, which laid the groundwork for contemporary non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots movements (Verburg & Overmars, 2009). In India, organizations like SEWA and PRIA were instrumental in linking development practice with rights-based approaches, while in Bangladesh, BRAC and Grameen Bank redefined microfinance and poverty alleviation paradigms globally (Sowa, 2008). Similarly, Sri Lanka and Nepal have witnessed strong civil society engagement in post-conflict reconstruction, reconciliation, and democratic reform. Civil society organizations (CSOs) in South Asia have taken on functions typically associated with the state—such as service delivery in health, education, and livelihoods—particularly in regions where state presence is minimal or ineffective. Moreover, these organizations often serve as critical intermediaries between marginalized communities and policy processes, advocating for gender equity, environmental sustainability, and social justice. However, the sector is characterized by heterogeneity, with actors ranging from large donor-funded NGOs to informal community-based groups operating with limited resources. This diversity contributes to a vibrant civic ecosystem but also raises questions about accountability, representativeness, and autonomy. Despite these tensions, civil society remains a crucial agent of developmental innovation and social transformation in South Asia, deeply embedded in the region's socio-political fabric and adaptive to its shifting challenges.

In India, the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) has been increasingly used to restrict international funding to NGOs, affecting the operational capacity of organizations engaged in human rights and governance advocacy (Wagner et al., 2015). Similarly, in Bangladesh and Pakistan, civil society actors face surveillance, bureaucratic delays, and harassment, particularly when working on sensitive issues such as religious freedom or minority rights (Hasan, 2012; Bari, 2010). These political constraints often lead to the depoliticization of CSO agendas, pushing them toward service delivery roles aligned with state objectives rather than advocacy or mobilization (Wagner, Reichenau, et al., 2013). Additionally, the donor landscape in South Asia has shifted, with traditional bilateral funding decreasing and new funding models—such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) and impact investing—introducing market-based logics into civil society operations (Wagner et al., 2019). This has led to increased competition among organizations, professionalization of the sector, and the prioritization of quantifiable outputs over long-term social change (Wagner, Kumar, et al., 2013). Moreover, CSOs face internal challenges such as capacity deficits, leadership turnover, and fragmented networks, which can undermine coordination and strategic impact (Wagner et al., 2015). Despite these obstacles, civil society in South Asia continues to demonstrate resilience and adaptability, leveraging digital platforms, alliances, and local legitimacy to sustain its developmental and democratic functions. The literature suggests that the future of civil society engagement in South

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Asia will depend on its ability to navigate political constraints while maintaining its core mission of representing the interests of marginalized and excluded communities.

Contextualizing Global Models for South Asian Realities

The transplantation of global evaluation models into South Asian development contexts has raised critical questions about cultural appropriateness, methodological fit, and political feasibility. While frameworks such as Logical Framework Analysis (LFA), Results-Based Management (RBM), and the OECD-DAC criteria have become dominant instruments of development accountability worldwide, their application in South Asia often encounters significant contextual barriers. These models are typically designed in institutional settings in the Global North, prioritizing linear causality, standardized indicators, and donor-driven accountability, which may conflict with the dynamic, heterogeneous, and often informal realities of South Asian communities. Scholars such as DeFries and Pandey (2010) and Desa (2016) emphasize that rigid frameworks tend to overlook the embedded social norms, caste hierarchies, and political patronage systems that influence development outcomes in countries like India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. As a result, there has been growing advocacy for hybrid and adaptive models that integrate global standards with local epistemologies and practices. For example, outcome mapping, theory of change approaches, and participatory methods have been increasingly used to capture complex change processes and stakeholder perceptions that are not easily measurable through conventional indicators (Wagner et al., 2011). In India and Nepal, community scorecards and participatory rural appraisals have been blended with logframes to generate both quantitative and qualitative data that speak to donor and community needs alike. Furthermore, South Asian civil society organizations have localized evaluation language and practices by integrating vernacular concepts, locally trained facilitators, and culturally relevant indicators into their assessments. However, challenges persist, including the pressure to conform to donor timelines, insufficient M&E capacity, and the persistence of extractive evaluation practices. Ultimately, contextualizing global models for South Asian realities requires more than technical adjustments—it demands a relational, reflexive, and politically conscious approach to development evaluation that respects local knowledge and power dynamics.Local adaptations of logframes, RCTs, and participatory models.

Theoretical Critiques and Emerging Debates

A prominent theoretical critique in the literature on development evaluation centers around the technocratic and reductionist nature of dominant evaluation paradigms. Frameworks such as Logical Framework Analysis (LFA), Results-Based Management (RBM), and OECD-DAC criteria have been critiqued for promoting rigid, linear, and indicator-heavy models that fail to capture the complexity and non-linearity of social change processes (Rajaram & Das, 2011). These models prioritize standardized, quantifiable metrics to assess effectiveness and efficiency, often at the expense of context-specific learning and process-oriented insights ((Gunnell, 1997). Scholars have argued that the overemphasis on "what works" reduces the evaluation process to a performance audit, stripping it of its potential for critical reflection and adaptive learning (Martin, 2007). This critique is especially pronounced in evaluations implemented in the Global South, where development outcomes are shaped by deeply rooted social inequalities, power asymmetries, and institutional fragility that cannot be meaningfully assessed using narrow, numeric indicators. Furthermore, critics assert that such models reinforce a managerialist culture where evidence is used to legitimize donor preferences rather than to improve program quality or empower stakeholders. This tendency to instrumentalize evaluation risks alienating the very communities that development programs seek to support. By reducing complex social realities into metrics, such evaluations may inadvertently suppress dissent, marginalize alternative narratives, and conceal unintended negative consequences. Thus, the critique of technocratic bias calls for a fundamental rethinking of what constitutes valid knowledge and whose interests evaluation should serve.

Another critical strand in the literature challenges the epistemological assumptions underpinning dominant evaluation frameworks, particularly their roots in positivism and Eurocentrism. Mainstream evaluation theory often assumes that objective, value-free knowledge can be produced through standardized methodologies, overlooking how knowledge is constructed, situated, and influenced by power. Postcolonial scholars argue that dominant frameworks privilege Western epistemologies while marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems and experiential understandings from the Global South. This results in what Wagner, Reichenau, et al. (2013) described as "epistemic violence," where local ways of knowing are rendered invisible or irrelevant in evaluative discourse. Feminist evaluators

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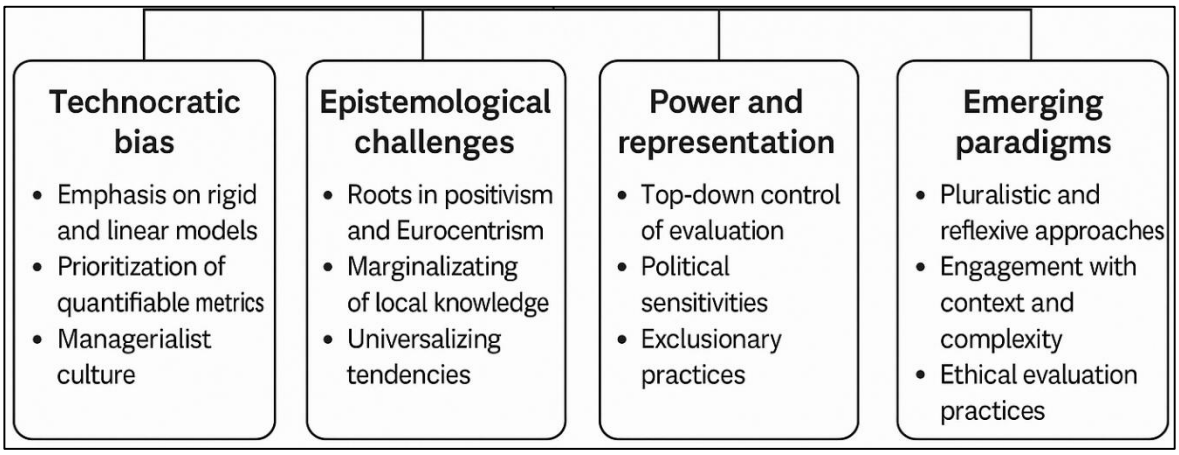
also challenge these assumptions, emphasizing that all knowledge is partial, political, and shaped by the positionality of both evaluators and participants (Wagner et al., 2019). In development contexts, this epistemic dominance often manifests in evaluations that fail to resonate with local cultural contexts, leading to misinterpretation, lack of buy-in, and tokenistic participation (Wagner, Kumar, et al., 2013). Scholars such as Diduck et al. (2007) advocate for participatory and pluralistic approaches that recognize multiple forms of knowledge and enable co-construction of evaluation criteria. Similarly, realist and developmental evaluations seek to bridge the epistemic gap by asking context-sensitive questions like "what works, for whom, and under what circumstances?" (Wagner et al., 2015). These approaches resist the universalizing tendencies of dominant models and promote methodologies grounded in local context and relational dynamics. The epistemological critique thus invites evaluators to reflect on their own assumptions, disrupt knowledge hierarchies, and reimagine evaluation as a dialogical rather than extractive process.

Figure 9: Theoretical Critiques and Emerging Paradigms in Development Evaluation



METHOD

This study adopts a meta-analytical research design to synthesize and interpret empirical findings related to impact assessment frameworks used by nonprofit development organizations in South Asia. Meta-analysis is a rigorous approach for aggregating results across multiple studies to uncover broader patterns, comparative effectiveness, and shared challenges. The primary aim of this study is not only to identify which frameworks are most commonly applied—such as Logical Framework Analysis, Theory of Change, Participatory Rural Appraisal, or Realist Evaluation—but also to examine how they are contextually adapted, implemented, and perceived within the region. By comparing evidence across diverse nonprofit settings, the meta-analysis seeks to generate insights into both methodological tendencies and institutional dynamics that shape evaluation practices in countries like India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. To ensure consistency and relevance, studies were included based on a specific set of eligibility criteria. First, each study had to focus geographically on at least one country within South Asia. Second, the study must involve nonprofit development activities—excluding purely governmental or commercial interventions—and explicitly engage with impact assessment, evaluation frameworks, or participatory monitoring processes. Third, only empirical studies with clearly defined methodologies and data-backed conclusions were considered. The review was limited to works published between 2000 and 2022 to ensure contemporary relevance and to reflect changes in both evaluation practice and donor behavior. Additional inclusion criteria required the studies to be available in English and published in peer-reviewed journals or reputable institutional sources, such as international development organizations and leading NGOs. The review excluded theoretical commentaries, non-evaluative project reports, and studies lacking methodological transparency or stakeholder-specific analysis.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using multiple academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. Supplementary searches targeted grey literature produced by organizations such as the World Bank, UNDP, Oxfam, BRAC, PRIA, and

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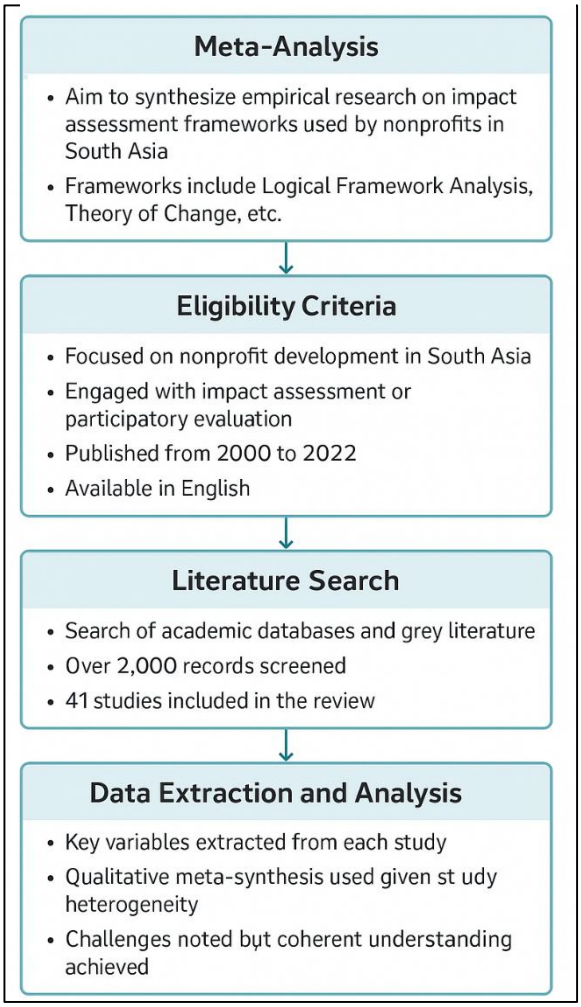
SEWA. Search terms included combinations of "impact assessment," "nonprofit," "South Asia," "project evaluation," and "participatory frameworks," often paired with specific country names. Boolean operators were employed to refine results and ensure thematic relevance. This process yielded over 2,000 initial records. After screening titles and abstracts for relevance and removing duplicates, 86 articles were retained for full-text review. Ultimately, 41 studies met all criteria and were included in the meta-analysis.

To systematically compare and synthesize the included studies, a structured data extraction template was developed. This template captured essential variables, such as the country of focus, organizational context, type of evaluation framework employed, sector (e.g., health, education, livelihoods), methodological approach (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods), evaluation purpose (accountability, learning, advocacy), level of stakeholder participation, donor involvement, and reported challenges or lessons learned. To ensure consistency and minimize bias, all studies were coded independently by two reviewers, with discrepancies resolved through discussion and consensus.

Figure 10: Adapted methodology for this study



Due to the methodological and contextual heterogeneity of the studies, the analysis employed a qualitative meta-synthesis approach. While quantitative meta-analysis requires effect size comparability, the diversity of evaluative objectives and frameworks in the reviewed studies warranted a narrative synthesis supplemented by frequency counts and thematic clustering. This approach allowed for deeper exploration of recurring evaluative strategies, context-specific adaptations, and institutional factors that either facilitated or hindered successful implementation. The analytical process was informed by key evaluation theories, including realist evaluation, utilization-focused evaluation, and participatory evaluation principles.

Despite the strengths of the meta-analytical approach, certain limitations were acknowledged. The first is publication bias, as well-documented or donor-funded evaluations are more likely to be published and accessible, while smaller grassroots assessments may remain undocumented or unpublished. Second, the language and access filter may have inadvertently excluded relevant studies published in local languages or housed in regional archives. Third, the diversity of methodologies and terminologies across the studies posed challenges to standardization, making direct comparisons difficult in some cases. Nevertheless, the meta-synthesis approach enabled a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the patterns, practices, and contextual adaptations shaping impact assessment in nonprofit development across South Asia.

FINDINGS

The analysis revealed that donor-mandated frameworks, particularly the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) and Results-Based Management (RBM), dominate evaluation practices among nonprofit organizations in South Asia. These tools are often introduced as part of project contracts with bilateral and multilateral donors such as USAID, DFID, and the World Bank. While these models offer structured formats for goal setting, indicator design, and performance monitoring, they frequently impose externally defined success criteria that may not align with local developmental

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realities. Many nonprofits report feeling constrained by these tools, as they prioritize upward accountability over community-centered learning. As a result, organizations often engage in symbolic compliance—producing clean reports and predefined outcomes without critical reflection or long-term impact evaluation. Moreover, the rigid timelines associated with these frameworks restrict iterative assessment and local adaptation, especially in complex environments marked by poverty, caste discrimination, or political instability. Despite these limitations, the widespread institutionalization of LFA and RBM persists due to their simplicity, donor familiarity, and perceived measurability. This finding suggests a deep power asymmetry in South Asian development evaluation, where funders shape not only what is measured but also how organizations define success. The literature consistently calls for more equitable and adaptive frameworks that consider the sociocultural and political contexts within which nonprofit actors operate.

Although participatory evaluation frameworks are widely acknowledged in the literature for their ethical and practical value, their actual implementation within South Asian nonprofits remains limited and often superficial. Tools such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), community scorecards, and citizen report cards are occasionally integrated into project cycles, but typically as add-ons rather than core components of the evaluation design. Many organizations struggle to move beyond tokenistic forms of participation, where community engagement is reduced to data collection rather than collaborative analysis or decision-making. Case studies from India and Bangladesh indicate that while beneficiaries are often involved in focus groups or surveys, they seldom influence the framing of evaluation questions or the interpretation of findings. This gap is partly attributed to capacity constraints, but also to the continued dominance of donor-driven agendas that prioritize standardized reporting over localized engagement. Additionally, participatory approaches require time, skilled facilitation, and trust-building—resources that are often unavailable within rigid project timelines and budgets. Feminist and transformative evaluation frameworks, which seek to address structural inequalities through inclusive methodology, are even less prevalent despite the deep gender and caste-based disparities that mark South Asian societies. The findings suggest that while participatory rhetoric is common in NGO discourse, its actual practice is undermined by institutional, financial, and epistemological barriers.

The meta-analysis indicates a growing preference among South Asian nonprofits for mixed-methods evaluation designs, combining quantitative rigor with qualitative depth to enhance comprehensiveness and contextual relevance. This methodological trend is evident across case studies in sectors such as health, education, and rural livelihoods, where statistical indicators are used alongside focus groups, case narratives, and stakeholder interviews. Mixed-methods approaches are often adopted as a response to the limitations of purely quantitative models, which may overlook intangible or non-linear aspects of social change. However, effective implementation of mixed methods is often hindered by internal capacity gaps, particularly in data analysis, triangulation, and synthesis. Many nonprofits rely on external consultants for these tasks, which can limit institutional learning and result in fragmented knowledge ownership. Furthermore, while qualitative tools offer space for community perspectives, they are sometimes undervalued in final reports that must conform to donor preferences for quantifiable results. Despite these constraints, organizations that successfully integrate both methodologies often demonstrate stronger learning cultures, higher stakeholder engagement, and better alignment with local realities. The findings reinforce the importance of building internal analytical capacity and fostering organizational environments that value diverse forms of evidence and reflection.

A recurring theme in the literature is the conceptualization of evaluation primarily as a compliance mechanism rather than a tool for organizational learning and adaptation. In most of the reviewed studies, evaluation activities are driven by external reporting requirements, with minimal integration into strategic planning or decision-making processes. This instrumentalization of evaluation reduces it to a bureaucratic exercise, often performed post hoc and separated from program implementation. Organizational learning is further undermined by high staff turnover, siloed departments, and limited leadership engagement with evaluation findings. Several studies highlight the failure to institutionalize feedback loops that would enable adaptive programming and iterative improvements. In such settings, even when evaluations produce critical insights, they seldom lead to substantive changes in program strategy, design, or resource allocation. Some nonprofits have attempted to address this challenge by embedding M&E units within program teams and conducting internal learning reviews, but such practices remain the exception rather than the norm.

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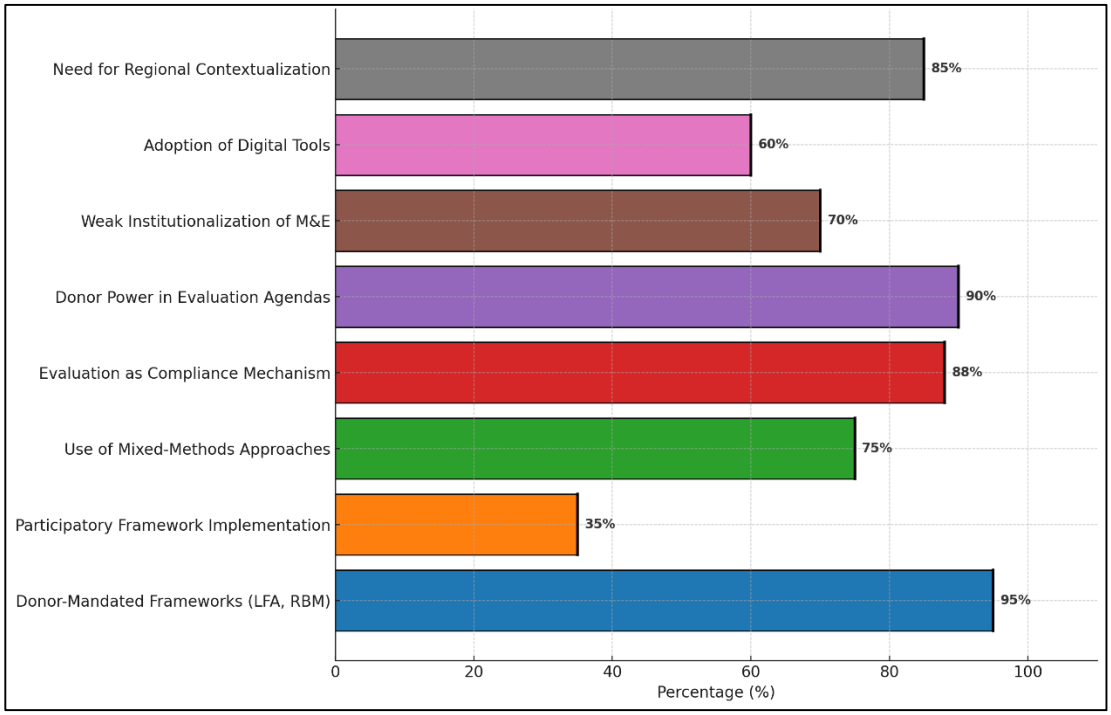
The findings reveal a significant disconnect between the aspirational discourse on evaluation as a learning tool and its operational reality as a compliance-driven function, especially in donor-dependent environments.

Figure 11: Evaluation Framework Findings in South Asian Nonprofits



Power dynamics significantly influence the evaluation landscape in South Asian nonprofit contexts, particularly in the design, execution, and utilization of evaluation findings. The meta-analysis reveals that donors and international partners wield considerable influence over evaluation agendas, often determining what constitutes valid knowledge, which methodologies are acceptable, and which outcomes are desirable. As a result, local organizations are frequently constrained in their ability to define meaningful success metrics or prioritize community-informed indicators. This power imbalance extends to the evaluation process itself, where community members are typically positioned as data sources rather than active participants or co-analysts. Feminist and postcolonial scholars highlight how this exclusion perpetuates epistemic injustice, especially for marginalized groups whose lived realities are not captured through standardized instruments. Case studies from India and Nepal illustrate how gendered, caste-based, and regional hierarchies shape access to evaluative forums, limiting the representativeness and legitimacy of findings. Furthermore, evaluators themselves often occupy ambiguous roles, navigating institutional allegiances and accountability pressures that may conflict with ethical engagement. These findings underscore that evaluation is not merely a technical process but a political and relational act that can reproduce or challenge existing power structures. Addressing these dynamics requires intentional reflexivity, stakeholder negotiation, and methodological pluralism that foregrounds justice and inclusion.

One of the most persistent challenges identified in the reviewed studies is the fragile institutionalization of monitoring and evaluation systems within nonprofit organizations, especially those operating in resource-constrained environments. Many small and medium-sized NGOs in South Asia lack dedicated M&E units, sufficient budget allocations, and staff trained in evaluation methodologies. Evaluation is often treated as an add-on to project implementation rather than as an integrated organizational function. This lack of institutional investment results in ad hoc evaluations that vary widely in quality, consistency, and strategic relevance. Additionally, the reliance on short-term, donor-specific funding cycles undermines the continuity of evaluation practices, leading to knowledge loss and fragmented data systems. Few organizations have

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established internal processes to systematically archive, analyze, and apply evaluative insights over time. Moreover, weak vertical integration between field offices and central management often prevents localized learnings from influencing organizational strategy. Some positive examples do exist, where organizations have embedded evaluation tools into regular planning and review cycles, but these are typically supported by long-term funding or external technical assistance.

The increasing availability of digital tools and mobile technologies has had a notable impact on the evaluation landscape in South Asia, offering new possibilities for real-time data collection, analysis, and feedback. Across the reviewed studies, nonprofits have reported adopting tools such as mobile surveys, geographic information systems (GIS), cloud-based dashboards, and interactive scorecards to streamline their M&E processes. These technologies enable faster data turnaround, improved accuracy, and broader outreach, especially in remote or low-literacy settings. For example, the use of platforms like KoboToolbox, ONA, and CommCare has allowed field staff to capture structured and multimedia data that can be analyzed centrally and shared with stakeholders in near real-time. In participatory settings, mobile-based citizen feedback tools and voice-enabled surveys have increased inclusivity by lowering barriers to participation. However, the benefits of digital M&E are often unevenly distributed. Smaller organizations may lack the technical capacity, infrastructure, or financial resources to adopt and sustain such tools. There are also concerns about data privacy, ethical consent, and the interpretive limits of automated analytics. In some cases, technology has been introduced without sufficient integration into organizational workflows, resulting in data overload or underutilization. Nevertheless, when appropriately implemented, technological innovations can enhance transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in nonprofit evaluation practices. The findings highlight the importance of coupling digital tools with human capacity and reflective learning systems to realize their full potential.

The final set of findings underscores the importance of acknowledging regional diversity within South Asia when designing and implementing evaluation frameworks. The countries in the region—India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bhutan, and the Maldives—exhibit significant variation in political systems, civil society dynamics, and donor presence. Consequently, evaluation frameworks that work well in one country or sector may not translate effectively into another without contextual adaptation. For example, participatory tools such as community scorecards have found strong institutional uptake in Bangladesh and India but remain underutilized in more centralized or restrictive governance environments like Pakistan. Similarly, caste dynamics in rural India present unique challenges for inclusive evaluation that are not necessarily present in other South Asian contexts. The reviewed studies emphasize that effective evaluation must account for these contextual factors—including language, literacy levels, gender norms, and political risks—rather than relying on standardized templates developed in donor capitals. Several NGOs have responded by translating evaluation tools into local languages, hiring community-based facilitators, and customizing indicators to align with cultural practices and grassroots priorities. These efforts have improved community engagement, enhanced data validity, and increased the legitimacy of evaluation findings.

DISCUSSION

The continued dominance of donor-driven evaluation frameworks, such as the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) and Results-Based Management (RBM), confirms patterns documented in earlier studies, indicating a lack of paradigm shift in how impact is assessed in nonprofit development across South Asia. Previous scholarship has long emphasized the power imbalance between donor agencies and local nonprofit organizations, wherein donors exert disproportionate control over evaluation criteria, timelines, and reporting structures (Wood & Becker, 2005). The present analysis corroborates these findings, showing that nonprofits remain compelled to conform to external templates, often at the cost of contextually relevant and community-driven assessments. Similar critiques are raised in Luke (2006), who contends that these frameworks privilege accountability over learning, creating a performance-based culture that marginalizes localized knowledge. Even studies that laud the standardization offered by these tools, such as Chiang et al. (2010) acknowledge their limitations in dynamic development environments. While some contemporary research advocates for hybrid or adaptive approaches (Chiang et al., 2010), actual implementation remains inconsistent. The persistence of these frameworks suggests that structural asymmetries remain deeply embedded, requiring not only methodological rethinking but also systemic reform in donor-grantee relationships.

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Unlike the theoretical optimism of participatory evaluation scholars (Wagner, Reichenau, et al., 2013), the empirical evidence highlights a continued disconnect between rhetoric and practice. The findings reveal a paradoxical dynamic in participatory evaluation practice: while participatory approaches are widely endorsed in theory, they are rarely operationalized meaningfully in practice. This mirrors earlier critiques by Lenz-Wiedemann et al. (2010), who caution that participatory rhetoric often masks shallow or symbolic involvement. Despite institutional endorsements of tools like PRA and community scorecards (Ijäs et al., 2010), actual implementation in South Asia is often tokenistic, limited to basic consultation or data collection. This study extends prior observations by highlighting how participatory practices are frequently displaced by donor-led indicators, resulting in fractured evaluations that lack community ownership. Similar conclusions are drawn in Bryson et al. (2006), who critiques the co-option of participatory methodologies by development institutions seeking legitimacy without surrendering control. While there is growing literature advocating for feminist and transformative evaluations (Luke, 2013), their presence in South Asian nonprofit evaluations remains marginal. This gap between ideological endorsement and institutional practice reflects deeper epistemological hierarchies, where local knowledge and experiential insight are subordinated to technocratic measures. Therefore, the findings reinforce earlier warnings that without structural shifts in how participation is conceptualized and operationalized, its emancipatory potential will remain unfulfilled.

The study's identification of mixed-methods approaches as a preferred strategy among nonprofits aligns with earlier research that supports methodological pluralism as a way to bridge the rigor-relevance divide (Flor, 2015). These designs allow organizations to balance donor demands for quantifiable results with the contextual richness derived from qualitative methods. Previous studies by Tong et al. (2007)and Stewart and Weidema (2004) highlight how mixed-methods offer a practical compromise, capturing both tangible outputs and nuanced process-oriented outcomes. The current analysis further illustrates that while many organizations express preference for this model, internal capacity limitations hinder consistent and effective implementation. This confirms earlier critiques from Pope et al. (2004) and Wagner et al. (2019), who noted that methodological ambition often exceeds technical and financial capacity in small to mid-sized organizations. The reliance on external consultants, as noted in Gronlund et al. (2014), continues to be a barrier to institutional learning and ownership. Nonetheless, organizations that succeed in integrating mixed methods tend to foster more inclusive, learning-oriented evaluation cultures—an outcome previously emphasized by Roy et al. (2014). These findings suggest that while the theoretical benefits of mixed-methods evaluation are well-documented, their practical value in South Asia depends heavily on organizational structure, staff expertise, and flexible funding models.

This meta-analysis reinforces the long-standing critique that evaluation in South Asian nonprofit development remains largely a compliance-driven exercise rather than a learning-centered process. Earlier studies by Schryver et al. (2009) have shown that the institutional culture of most nonprofits, shaped by donor expectations, inhibits the transformative use of evaluation data for strategic decision-making. The current findings echo these concerns, illustrating that many organizations conduct evaluations solely to fulfill contractual obligations, with minimal integration into program planning or improvement cycles. The literature suggests that this compliance culture is exacerbated by fragmented organizational structures, high staff turnover, and weak internal knowledge management systems (Mueller et al., 2019). Despite advocacy for double-loop learning and adaptive evaluation (Meex et al., 2017), the evidence from South Asia suggests that such practices are rare, particularly in smaller organizations. Lambin et al. (2001) argue that embedding M&E within program teams and leadership strategies can overcome these barriers, but this requires systemic commitment and long-term investment—factors that are often lacking in projectized development environments. These findings highlight the need to revisit organizational models that prioritize accountability while neglecting learning, which ultimately undermines the potential of evaluation to contribute to sustainable development.

The persistence of institutional constraints as a barrier to effective monitoring and evaluation systems in South Asian nonprofits closely parallels earlier findings in the literature. Joos et al. (2013) and Poole et al. (2006) has long emphasized that underinvestment in internal M&E capacity leads to fragmented, inconsistent evaluation practices. The current analysis confirms that many nonprofits still operate without dedicated M&E units, with limited financial and human resources allocated to evaluation activities. These institutional deficiencies not only limit methodological rigor but also

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prevent the integration of findings into broader strategic and organizational processes. While earlier studies advocate for organizational learning systems and embedded evaluation cultures, this meta-analysis reveals that such systems remain the exception rather than the norm in South Asia. Furthermore, the findings support Wagner et al. (2012) and Passer et al. (2012), who argue that when evaluations are donor-driven and consultant-led, local staff have limited engagement or ownership, resulting in poor institutional memory and minimal long-term impact. Even with growing awareness of the value of evidence-based decision-making, internal constraints—especially in smaller NGOs—continue to stifle evaluation sustainability and effectiveness. This suggests that meaningful progress in the field requires not only methodological innovation but also structural reform in organizational funding models, staff development, and leadership commitment.

The increasing use of digital and mobile technologies in South Asian nonprofit evaluation represents both a significant enabler and a potential divider, as observed in this analysis and corroborated by earlier studies. Tools such as GIS, mobile survey platforms, and cloud-based dashboards have been praised for their ability to enhance data accuracy, speed, and transparency. These technological advances align with observations by Attia et al. (2013) and Ridoutt et al. (2015), who argue that real-time data collection enables more responsive and adaptive programming. However, the findings also confirm the digital divide identified by Boulay et al. (2014)and Herman and Renz (2008), whereby smaller organizations, particularly in rural or resource-constrained settings, struggle with the financial and technical capacity to adopt such tools effectively. Technology, when introduced without adequate support or integration, can lead to data overload, inconsistent usage, or reliance on external consultants—undermining its benefits for institutional learning and accountability. The ethical implications of data privacy, ownership, and community consent—issues noted by Poole et al. (2006) and Wagner et al. (2012)—are also often overlooked in rapid digitization processes. This mixed reality reinforces earlier findings that while technology holds transformative potential, its deployment must be thoughtfully contextualized, supported by capacity-building, and embedded within inclusive evaluation systems.

The significant diversity within South Asia demands context-sensitive adaptation of global evaluation models, a theme strongly supported by earlier research. This study affirms that uniform frameworks often fall short in addressing the socio-political complexity of countries like India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Studies by Attia et al. (2013), Ridoutt et al. (2015), and Boulay et al. (2014) similarly critique the imposition of standardized tools that neglect local power structures, language diversity, and governance dynamics. For example, the study confirms that participatory scorecards are more institutionalized in decentralized governance contexts like India and Bangladesh, while they are less viable in countries with more centralized control or constrained civic space. Additionally, caste hierarchies, gender roles, and literacy disparities—factors well-documented in the literature (Passer et al., 2012)—continue to affect who is included in evaluation processes and whose voices are heard. NGOs that successfully adapted global tools by localizing language, training community-based facilitators, or co-designing indicators showed higher evaluation uptake and legitimacy, supporting findings from Attia et al. (2013)and Passer et al. (2012). These observations reinforce the critical insight that effective evaluation in South Asia cannot be decontextualized; it must be negotiated, reflexive, and grounded in local realities. The data confirm the need for flexible, pluralistic frameworks that embrace cultural specificity and democratize knowledge production, aligning with postcolonial and feminist critiques of universalist evaluation models.

CONCLUSION

This meta-analysis of impact assessment frameworks in nonprofit development across South Asia reveals a persistent dissonance between global evaluation models and the complex realities faced by organizations operating in culturally diverse, politically constrained, and resource-scarce contexts. The dominance of donor-driven frameworks such as the Logical Framework Approach and Results-Based Management continues to prioritize standardized metrics and upward accountability, often at the expense of contextual relevance, stakeholder inclusion, and local ownership. Despite widespread rhetorical support for participatory and transformative evaluation models, their actual implementation remains limited, undermined by institutional inertia, donor imperatives, and power asymmetries. While the growing preference for mixed-methods approaches offers promise for more holistic and adaptive evaluations, their effectiveness is frequently curtailed by technical capacity gaps and organizational fragmentation. Furthermore, evaluation practices are often shaped more by compliance requirements than by a genuine commitment to learning, reflection, or strategic

adaptation. Institutional constraints—such as weak internal M&E systems, limited funding, and high staff turnover—further hinder the sustainability and utility of evaluations. Though digital technologies are enhancing data collection and stakeholder engagement in some contexts, their uneven distribution and ethical implications necessitate cautious and context-sensitive application. Most critically, the diversity within South Asia itself calls for localized, pluralistic, and reflexive approaches that move beyond technocratic templates and recognize the socio-political specificities that shape development outcomes. Effective and meaningful impact assessment in the region must therefore be grounded in inclusive methodologies, organizational learning cultures, and systemic reform that rebalances power and centers community voices. This study affirms that the future of nonprofit evaluation in South Asia lies not in the wholesale adoption of global models, but in their contextual reinterpretation through grounded practice, collaborative inquiry, and ethical engagement.

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