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Highlighting project impact: The underestimated power of personal stories

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Abstract

Measuring the impact of project interventions becomes a more and more common request from donor organisations. In the quest for measurable impact and the aim to assess project interventions, the scientific community commonly uses surveys. Indeed, well-planned surveys and interviews are crucial for quantifiable tools such as impact evaluation, which aims to establish a causal relationship between the project intervention and its impact on people's lives. However, these tools are highly demanding in costs and scientific conceptualisation, usually exceeding the project's scope. Often a false compromise is made, leading to extensive survey data, which lacks comparability across surveyed groups, causal connection with interventions, or baseline data. When such anonymous quantitative data lacks rigid scientific validation it tells us very little about the lives of the interviewed people. Conclusions from such data make it hard for us to understand the realities of people involved in the project and how the track of their lives might have changed through exposure to project interventions. We have tried out a diametrically different approach within the system comparison trial in the tropics (SysCom) in India. The project works with farmers and a team of national and international researchers on organic cotton. For the series “Faces of Organic Cotton”, we have talked to eleven people involved at some level within the project, including farmers, researchers, cotton processors, and school children. The conversations followed general questions and were guided by curiosity to understand more of the interviewee's life beyond the project. The result was 11 highly personal stories, where the project and its effect are only one facets of people's lives. We have considered the inherent challenges of such an approach: translation, bias to over-positivity, and white saviorism. The stories were written in first person, attempting to represent their own stories in their own words as accurately as possible. The text was complemented by high-quality photographs and published on social media, websites, and a booklet. The reactions and feedback were very positive, allowing donors, companies, and consumers alike to understand better the impact of organic cotton in the region where it's grown.

Keywords: Cotton, impact, India, organic, participatory research, story telling