

Eggen, Michael; University of Wisconsin-Madison
EGGENM@GMAIL.COM
Authors: Michael Eggen
Matthew Turner

Title: Blinded by success: How upward accountability and project proliferation create spaces of exploitation in sustainable development



Sustainable development funded by the major development agencies and implemented by local and international NGOs is fraught with difficulty in accountability. Compounding the difficulties of accountability are a development landscape that includes many interconnected but separate and discrete projects. Work towards the Sustainable Development Goals in the rural Global South may proceed on many fronts from increasing agricultural productivity to creating markets and providing credit to basic health and veterinary care. A problem is created when the dynamics of accountability interact with implementation and measurement of these projects to create unforeseen results. Under what circumstances might the nature of accountability and performance measurement related to sustainable development initiatives lead to perverse outcomes? Here, using a comparative case study of two villages in Ethiopia, my study shows that, under certain circumstances, multi-pronged, pro-poor, sustainable development initiatives may create space for abuse and exploitation of participants, and as separate initiatives interact, vulnerability and poverty may be increased. Research on accountability has focused on the influence of the vertical direction of accountability (upward versus downward) reinforcing a siloed view of development projects without addressing a more expansive view of results and their measurement. This study illustrates the need to understand how simple, functional metrics of development projects may hide emergent interactions across separate initiatives. Measuring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals will require a broader strategic view among projects, or development projects risk occluding and exacerbating the over-determined nature of the very problems they seek to address. This result will be of use to development practitioners in the Global South where sustainable development is pursued by integrated and disparate partnerships of international bodies, national governments, NGOs and community groups.