



MONITORING & EVALUATION: A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

THE PATH TO POSITIVE CHANGE

Commitment to evaluation is a signal about the importance of achieving results and the transparency of management.

Evidence

Increasingly we are hearing demand for evidence – proof that our funds, time, and effort have been well spent, and that together we are doing things that make sense and are efficient and effective in contributing to our goals of alleviating global poverty and promoting global economic growth, effective governance, and community and individual wellbeing.

Metrics

The focus on metrics as a way to communicate successes in a measurable way – minimizing multiple interpretations and controversies – must be balanced with more nuanced and analytic methods to illuminate realities that statistics cannot easily capture or convey. Education policy is a good example of the adverse impacts that can occur when testing and metrics supplant informed judgment and attention to important individual/subgroup needs, when statistics become more important than stories. On the other hand, stories are certainly never the “whole story.” The key is to balance statistics and stories to produce a genuine *understanding* that will inform both policymakers and taxpayers.

Decision-making

Building a monitoring and evaluation capability that is independent, rigorous, and reliable across U.S. foreign assistance activities will contribute to restoring the United States as a credible partner and ensure that U.S. taxpayer funds are invested well. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) inform program and policy decision makers about *whether* a desired result is or is not being achieved, as well as *for whom* and *why*. Monitoring and evaluation serve multiple purposes at different levels of foreign assistance decision making, requiring M&E systems that are both disciplined enough to ensure high-quality work and flexible enough to cope with the requirements of a complex and decentralized foreign assistance structure.

Quality monitoring and evaluation are critical components of effective governance—including development assistance. USAID, once a leader in project design, monitoring, and evaluation, has lost much of that capacity due to changes in priorities and lost technical expertise.

Doing Things Right

M&E systems as a whole help stakeholders know if problems are being correctly diagnosed and responded to effectively (doing the right things), and if interventions are being implemented as intended (doing things right).



Monitoring and evaluation are types of **applied research** that address practical, real-world questions at different stages in a project's life:

1) Regular **monitoring** activities, conducted principally in-house, inform the timely decision making of intervention managers by tracking changes in operating environments, advances in implementation, and progress toward achieving objectives (benchmarks).

2) Periodic **evaluations** help stakeholders assess an intervention's effect on a given problem, such as by analyzing an intervention's relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability or impact. The critical element that distinguishes evaluation from monitoring is its emphasis on the *analysis of the original theory and hypotheses* which shaped the project or program.

- **Mid-term evaluations**, normally performed by a combination of in-house and external experts, identify contextual factors (bottlenecks, constraints, unintended events) and judge whether intervention activities are bringing about desired changes. Findings and recommendations contribute to managerial decision-making and resource accountability. Such evaluations are done on an exceptional, as-needed basis and occasionally will review project design and propose tactical or strategic mid-course corrections.
- **Operations research** can be used to understand how to improve service delivery to maximize the effectiveness of an intervention and is useful when addressing complex or less familiar problems with more innovative or project specific interventions.
- **End-of-project evaluations**, usually led by external experts, tell managers and donors whether or not a project achieved its objectives and how well it was implemented, providing learning that can inform future project designs. End-of-project evaluations assess the extent to which predicted outcomes and results were achieved and why, and identify unpredicted outcomes and their relationship to the project's activities. Reports can inform decision makers about the potential for impact and sustainability, but cannot test for these results.
- **Impact evaluations** determine to what degree a program has led to significant, sustainable, positive changes. They are best performed and reviewed by independent experts. They inform implementers, funders, and policy makers as to policies and interventions that worked and did not work – what groups were affected positively or negatively by the project and why, and the policy implications of these impacts. They usually require more rigorous and systematic evaluation research designs. Because of the costs involved, the selection of a project for an impact evaluation must be carefully considered.
- **Sector Assessments:** Impact evaluations focused on an investment sector, e.g., health, roads, micro-enterprise, etc., provide a valuable perspective for analysis of what may or may not succeed under certain conditions on a country-wide, regional, continental or even broader basis. They can indicate valuable sector patterns and uncover information which can, in turn, be used in future **feasibility assessments** for new projects and help policy makers and project designers across the development assistance spectrum.

Overcoming
Obstacles to
M&E
Monitoring
Evaluation?



Time and Money: Positive Benefit/Cost Ratio?

Costs – both financial and in terms of human resource allocation – look high, but thoughtfully spent, justify the benefits. Implementers often prefer to undertake activities than to pause to assess their progress, either through monitoring or, when warranted, mid-term evaluations. Inadequate resources, overburdened staff, and tight timeframes can lead agencies to cut monitoring and evaluation in the interest of maximizing their investment in project activities. Often the net effect is precisely the opposite, and missteps are realized only much later, long after the ability to do anything to correct them. Yet, monitoring and evaluations can save time and money and increase reach over a project’s life by helping to ensure that inputs are well used and the project is on track to achieve its goal.

End-of-project evaluations and, even more so, impact evaluations can seem to come at a high cost, with uncertain benefits off in the future. Yet, project managers and policy makers use the findings of these evaluations to avoid repeating mistakes or sub-optimal designs, to replicate or tweak successful approaches to similar or new environments, and ideally, to innovate and design more effective projects and policies.

Hide Mistakes or Tell All?

Good evaluations focus on learning what works and why, but when future funding depends on past success, agencies are likely to soften conclusions and hide, rather than learn, from mistakes. Policy makers want to hear “success stories” and rarely if ever ask for “mistake stories” or lessons learned.

Measure the Trees or Remember the Forest?

While on-going accountability is critical, emphasis on reporting short-term results (often goods and services delivered) can take resources away from assessing longer-term effects. Metrics can easily measure progress in putting resources into place, but are only a means to the larger objective of whether inputs were timely received by the beneficiaries *and* demonstrably improved their lives.

On Balance Attribution: Who’s Responsible?

Every intervention is implemented in a multi-faceted, volatile environment in which many other interventions may be on-going simultaneously. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to attribute successes or failures solely to a project’s activities, nor is it necessary. However, M&E can identify and consider the potential synergies or counter forces in a project environment and suggest ways to maximize/minimize their effect on a project. Impact evaluators need careful analysis and judgment in drawing conclusions about effectiveness, synergies, impact and net contribution of project activities and the extent to which the project can be judged a good investment.

THE ESSENTIAL FRAMEWORK OF M&E

Guiding Principles

- Leadership: There is no substitute for this essential *sine qua non* in setting and



sustaining the mandate for monitoring and evaluation and assuring its central role in strategic program direction and project design. Without meaningful support from the top, effective M&E will not happen.

- **Stakeholder buy-in**: Educate all involved on why and how M&E can make their projects better—how it is a tool for them, not a threat to be used against them. Commitment to M&E must be instilled at all levels, in Washington and in the field, if it is to be successful.
- **Dedicate adequate resources**: Financial, human (technical capacities), time. Build these into project and program designs.
- **Promulgate evaluations**: Ensure transparency, accessibility and distribution of findings and recommendations. Do not let findings and recommendations become compromised or buried.
- **Commit to learning**: Apply lessons learned to guide strategic programs and project designs – follow the LOOP: design, monitor, evaluate – design, monitor, evaluate.
- **Ensure that evaluation is independent**, rigorous, and objective regardless of the methodologies: Both anecdotal reporting as well as fully supported statistical analyses can contribute to project effectiveness, and all methodologies have a place in the hierarchy of M&E investigations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Appoint committed leadership** who understand the value of creating **and funding** a learning environment and maintaining its focus year after year.
- **Create Focus and Promulgate a M&E Mandate**: Establish an independent office for monitoring and evaluating foreign assistance programs – either within a consolidated foreign assistance agency or, if there is no consolidation, then across all foreign assistance agencies – that is responsible for: setting standards; training and mentoring; guiding, responding to and supporting implementing units; conducting external studies, such as multi-country evaluations, meta-evaluations, and impact evaluations; and collecting and making accessible to the public all evaluations for the purposes of transparency, accountability and learning.
- **Broaden Participation**:
 - Appoint an independent external advisory group to provide oversight and advice and to lead external peer reviews of impact evaluations; **include citizen participation**.
 - Actively engage international and domestic organizations promoting higher-quality evaluation performance, such as: the OECD DAC Network on Development Evaluation; International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie); and professional evaluation associations.
- **Evaluate the progress** of building a **learning environment**. Participation, responsiveness, level of effort, quality, relevance—these and other aspects of an M&E initiative should be formally reviewed on a regular basis.