Monitoring and evaluation (M&E)

A brief overview

by Ian Mowatt

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Ian Mowatt and his family began work in Kenya in 1986 serving in a variety of roles: center manager for the Bible Translation and Literacy (BTL) center, technical services department manager, and literacy survey worker in the northwest of the country. In 1989, Ian returned to the UK where he completed a Masters Degree in Rural Social Development at the University of Reading. From 1991–95, he served as the community development advisor for BTL. In April 1995, Ian accepted an assignment to work at SIL UK in what is now known as International Programmes, where he is involved in networking and with his main areas of expertise being in project design and funding. In addition, he is the course coordinator and head of department for the Intercultural Communication and Training course run at Horsleys Green.

1. What is monitoring and evaluation?

For the efficient management of a language, literacy, or development project, it is necessary to know what progress is being made against the objectives of the project and whether the project is making a positive difference to the participants. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) ought not to be seen as a separate discrete activity but rather as being an integral part of the program. The process for measuring this, M&E, should start at the project planning stage and go beyond the expected life of the project.

1.1. Monitoring

Monitoring is the regular process of collecting and analyzing data used for project assessment and guidance. It also involves the setting of indicators of achievement or progress and the means of measurement of those indicators. It provides the data on which evaluation is based.

**Common characteristics.** There is need for continuity of monitoring activities, starting at the project planning stage and continuing through the implementation until the project ends. To form a baseline at the start of a project, there must be the collection of data, which will be used for measuring the progress of the project in achieving objectives and outputs. Gaps in monitoring data could lead to difficulties for later evaluations or for decision making that relies on monitoring data. In addition to continuity, there must be a systematic approach whereby the monitoring process is carried out on a regular basis in terms of both timing and methodology.

**Purpose.** Monitoring provides timely, relevant, and useable data to address the following questions.

- Are project objectives being achieved?
- Are activities going according to schedule?
- Are there any problems surfacing?
- What strengths can be built upon?
- What are the weaknesses that need to be addressed?
- Is the impact of the project in accordance with the objectives?
- Is there any wastage of resources?

Additionally, it also provides records for long-term reviews, data for good planning, and data for public relations.

1.2. Evaluation

Evaluation is a retrospective assessment of performance against project objectives at a particular point in the life of the project or after the completion of the project. Evaluations take place in a field of tension as different stakeholders each have ideas as to the type of data required. It is important to recognize that this is the case and determine how the needs of each stakeholder could be best met. It may require considerable negotiation to reach an agreement as to what material is to be gathered for the evaluation.

**Common characteristics.** Evaluation is concerned with the analysis and interpretation of data. There is an element of judgment, often taken in a negative way. However, evaluation should be seen as fair assessment of what has occurred in the project without those involved feeling to be at fault. Part of the analysis should concern itself with issues of cause and effect. Evaluation can take place at one point in time (often retrospectively) or continuously; it addresses both time dimensions.

**Purpose.** Evaluation serves the role of identifying a project’s strengths, weaknesses, and relevance to the beneficiaries, thereby enabling those responsible to make sound decisions. Critical and constructive analysis will help identify potential improvements of technical and staff performance. Evaluation is essential for finding out whether or not a project is having the desired effect on the beneficiaries. Linked to this is the assessment of sustainability. It ensures effective use of resources and accountability. Finally, evaluation provides input for future work, helping to formulate policy for future work.

### 1.3. Indicators

For any monitoring and evaluation, one needs a set of indicators based on basic criteria. However, indicators will be different for each project. For example, in a literacy project some of the indicators could be items such as number of learners, test and pass rates, number of teachers trained, commitment to education, openness to change, and teacher’s performance.

### 1.4. Qualitative and quantitative data

Indicators can be quantitative or qualitative. For example, a project manager will need to know not only how many visits a worker has made, but also whether they were useful to the target group. Quantitative indicators are generally more familiar to users and straightforward to measure. Here, great care is needed to resist the temptation to collect vast amounts of unnecessary data. Qualitative indicators, however, are more difficult to deal with, because the concepts they address are less easy to pin down (for example, commitment to education, openness to change, and teacher’s performance).

Recognition of the relative strengths and weaknesses in quantitative and qualitative approaches to M&E work is important in deciding the most appropriate mix of methods or techniques to be used in any given instance.

### 1.5. Gathering the data

The choice of technique used in collecting the data will influence what is learned. For example, data on the numbers of teachers trained can be collected by written questionnaire but data on the performance of teachers cannot. Teacher’s performance data can be collected by interviewing. The development of new tools or techniques must involve all potential users. The point is often made that it is not possible to produce a ready-made list of tools for a project, because each project is unique.

### 1.6. Processing the data

Traditionally, the stage of processing data in M&E work has been carried out either by a specific M&E unit, project managers, head office staff, or outside consultants. Participatory M&E, however, encapsulates the spirit of participation by attempting to include users at all levels in the data analysis. As with the general philosophy of participation, it aims for as wide an involvement of stakeholders as possible in order to produce a greater sense of ownership, responsibility, motivation, and, in the long term, sustainability.

1.7. Disseminating and using the data

Once data has been transformed into data of use to project stakeholders, the key is to pass on that data. The M&E process is not complete until the data collected is actually used. This transfer of data should be a two-way process, that is, from grassroots to funders and vice versa.

2. Problems and constraints

Establishing monitoring and evaluation is rarely a trouble-free process and a number of authors outline common difficulties, such as

- over-ambitious design
- inadequate staff training and availability
- lack of resources
- poor data quality
- question mark over the legitimacy of qualitative data
- missing or incomplete baseline survey
- integration into project management
- undocumented changes
- avoidance of negative results, and
- timeliness.

3. External or internal evaluation

The issue of whether to use an external or internal evaluation methodology is widely discussed in the literature. While there tends to be agreement that monitoring should be an internal activity, the picture for evaluation is not so clear. The move towards participatory monitoring and evaluation implicitly entails a certain degree of internal involvement, however, this does not necessarily imply that an external evaluation has no value.

4. Training

In order to promote and sustain participation in M&E, local communities and project managers need support. As well as the desirability of having one trained person with a special interest in M&E to coordinate activities at project level, training for organization staff and local level participants is a vital element in effective M&E work.

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5. Monitoring and evaluation of M&E

As with all activities undertaken as part of a development project, M&E should be subject to its own monitoring and evaluation process. One important M&E methodology, which deserves specific mention, is participatory monitoring and evaluation. Narayan (1995) has identified a number of important issues to consider when adopting participatory monitoring and evaluation methods; these succinctly summarize much of what is recommended in this review as guidance for designing and implementing participatory M&E systems.

- Keep methods simple.
- Make a special effort to include women.
- Involve the users in analyzing the data. This makes a more effective base for other participatory activities.
- The accuracy and detail of information should be considered in the context of enabling users to understand new or action.
- Adopt the principle of “optimal ignorance,” that is, obtain only the required information.
- There is no formula. Learn what is suitable through experience.

When establishing participatory M&E, it is clear that the adoption of a systematic approach is essential. The series of steps widely advocated throughout much of the literature on this subject highlights the logical progression needed towards developing a complete system, so as to more effectively monitor and evaluate development activities, outcomes, and impact.

6. Summary

The importance of M&E in a literacy project was brought home to SIL UK and the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy, and Bible Translation (GILLBT) when they applied to the Department for International Development (DFID) in the UK for funding. Our first submission included what we felt to be a significant element on M&E, however, the DFID asked for further clarification specifically on the qualitative indicators and the M&E process. Having to further clarify the M&E process and indicators had a positive influence on the planning and subsequent running of the project.

An effective M&E system will help show whether or not a project is making progress towards stated goals and objectives. By means of M&E, positive impacts and planned outcomes can be maximized and negative effects minimized. Thus, M&E should be an integral part of any project whether it is language, literacy, or development focused.

Reference

