

MONITORING



Monitoring is the systematic and continuous collection and analysis of information about the progress of a development intervention. Monitoring is done to ensure that all the people who need to know about an intervention are properly informed, and so that decisions can be taken in a timely manner. There are many different types of monitoring, including financial monitoring, process monitoring and impact monitoring.

Within social development, monitoring can be defined as the “... *systematic and continuous collecting and analysing of information about the progress of a piece of work over time*” (Gosling and Edwards 2003, p12). Monitoring is done to ensure that all the people who need to know about a development intervention are properly informed about it. It is also done so that management decisions can be taken in a timely manner.

Traditionally, monitoring differs from evaluation because it is carried out by internal rather than external staff, it is ongoing rather than periodic, and it focuses more on activities and outputs than on outcomes and impact. In addition, monitoring usually relies on a system, rather than being a one-off exercise carried out a specific point in time.

Different types of monitoring

There are many different types of monitoring. Some of the most common types are described below. However, these are known by different names in different organisations.

- **Process or performance monitoring** focuses on the activities carried out as part of a development intervention. It is designed to assess whether and/or how well those activities are being implemented. It also covers the use of resources. Process monitoring is designed to provide the information needed to continually plan and review work, assess the success or otherwise of the implementation of projects and programmes, identify and deal with problems and challenges, and take advantage of opportunities as they arise.
- **Results or impact monitoring** aims to assess the changes brought about by a project or programme on a continuous basis. Often this means assessing changes in a target population (e.g. individuals, communities, supported organisations, targeted decision-makers). Impact monitoring can be used to assess progress towards goals and objectives, as well as unintended change. Despite the name, impact monitoring is more often associated with changes at outcome, rather than impact, level.
- **Beneficiary monitoring, or beneficiary contact monitoring**, is a specific type of impact monitoring that aims to track the perceptions of project or programme beneficiaries (IFRC 2011). It can include beneficiary

feedback mechanisms and beneficiary complaints mechanisms. Beneficiary monitoring can be seen as a specific type of participatory monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

- **Situation monitoring**, sometimes known as **scanning**, is concerned with monitoring the external environment. Sometimes this is done through defining and collecting indicators relating to issues such as the local political situation, changes in the economy, and the activities of other development actors. At other times, situation monitoring simply means keeping eyes and ears open in order to assess what is happening outside of a project or programme that might influence it.
- **Financial monitoring** is concerned with the monitoring of budgets and finance, and is linked to auditing. It is usually concerned with tracking costs against defined categories of expenditure.
- **Administrative or logistics monitoring** covers issues such as the maintenance of premises, transport, personnel, stock-keeping, and other forms of administration.
- **Compliance monitoring** is designed to ensure compliance with issues such as donor regulations, grant or contract requirements, government regulations, and ethical standards (ibid).
- **Management Information Systems (MIS)** are usually associated with computer-based systems, although some CSOs operate paper-based Management Information Systems. An MIS can cover any aspect of monitoring, but is more often associated with process, financial, administrative and compliance monitoring.

The remainder of this paper is largely concerned with process and impact monitoring. This is sometimes known collectively as **programme monitoring**.

The purpose of programme monitoring

Programme monitoring has many purposes, depending on the type of monitoring and the context. However, the primary purpose is to collect regular information on progress, and then use this to make constant adjustments to support the management of a project or programme. This includes ensuring plans and budgets are being

followed, and changing them when necessary. In this regard, good monitoring is often indistinguishable from good management.

In different circumstances, monitoring can also serve several other purposes. Some of the more common are:

- providing managers, staff and other stakeholders with information on the progress being made towards stated goals and objectives in order to demonstrate accountability to different stakeholders;
- providing information that enables approaches and strategies to be changed in response to evolving situations;
- identifying whether there is a need to change goals, objectives, plans or budgets over time;
- testing project or programme assumptions on a regular basis;
- identifying the need for further information or research;
- providing information that enhances ongoing learning, both within and outside a project or programme; and
- demonstrating or communicating activities and changes to other audiences for marketing or fundraising purposes.

Different perspectives on monitoring

INTRAC has often conducted an exercise in training where it asks workshop participants from large NGOs to identify the most important purpose of M&E, from a pre-defined list of ten different purposes. These include learning, improving, accountability, marketing, allocating resources and project management.

The results of this exercise are very consistent, but are almost entirely dependent on the location of the training. When carried out at head office level, learning, improving and accountability (both upwards to donors and downwards to partners and beneficiaries) almost always come out on top. However, in the field staff almost always choose project management as the most important purpose.

This reflects the fact that operational staff spend a huge amount of their time on routine monitoring that they consider essential for keeping projects and programmes on track. This includes drivers filling in forms, finance staff monitoring budgets, project staff writing field visit notes, management recording meeting minutes, administrative staff filing press reports or photographs, and all the other necessary tasks involved in managing a project or programme. Yet these kinds of activities are rarely acknowledged in evaluation literature.

Whilst not a robust study, these experiences suggest that the whole learning versus accountability debate for M&E may be an artificial construction led by evaluation experts and head offices in the North. At the very least, it provides grounds for questioning whether more attention needs to be focused on supporting people to do the basics of M&E right, rather than concentrating exclusively on complex evaluation methodologies and approaches.

The different functions of programme monitoring

The process of programme monitoring is hugely dependent on a variety of factors. How an organisation goes about programme monitoring depends on:

- what it has to do because other organisations (such as governments, donors or partners) expect it as a condition of support;
- the type of work it is undertaking (e.g. service delivery, capacity development, policy influencing, mobilisation);
- the sector of work (e.g. health, governance);
- the nature and culture of the organisation; and
- the available resources to carry out the work.

Because monitoring is essentially an internal task, monitoring systems need to be tailored to each individual organisation and situation. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. However, it is likely that most monitoring systems will need to carry out many if not all of the different functions described below.

It is important to note that in most monitoring systems these functions are all happening at the same time. Information is being collected, recorded, stored, shared and analysed at the same time as information is being used, reports written, and plans made or adjusted. There is no sequential step-by-step process, such as might be seen in an evaluation.

Planning: M&E and planning are always very closely linked. This is even more so for monitoring than evaluation. This is because feedback loops for monitoring are usually much shorter. In other words, the information generated through monitoring can result in changed plans immediately, whereas evaluation only feeds into changed plans at periodic intervals. Both process and impact monitoring may involve assessing unexpected change, but they are also closely concerned with monitoring progress against pre-planned objectives, activities, indicators, milestones and targets.

Process monitoring is often associated with short-term plans dealing with activities. These can include annual, quarterly, monthly and weekly activity plans, often with associated budgets. The purpose of much monitoring is to ensure that plans are being delivered as expected, and to take appropriate action where they are not.

Collecting information: Most CSOs spend a large amount of time collecting information on an ongoing basis. Sometimes information is collected through formal tools such as semi-structured interviews, structured observation and focus group discussions. A lot of monitoring also involves the routine collection and recording of numeric data on pre-defined templates.

However, monitoring may also involve unstructured information collection, particularly when visits are carried

out to the field. This kind of monitoring – observing what is happening, listening to different stakeholders, and talking to different people or groups – is often as important, if not more so, than formal monitoring exercises.

During monitoring, information is routinely collected on pre-defined objectives and indicators, or activities described in activity plans. However, information can also be collected on activities and changes that were not anticipated, or changes in the wider environment that might affect a project or programme.

Recording information: Some monitoring information can be acted on immediately. For example, if there is low attendance at community meetings in the morning then meetings can be switched to the afternoon. Often, however, monitoring information needs to be recorded so that it can be stored, shared, analysed, reported or used at a later date. Most CSOs have a variety of different forms and templates that are designed to capture and record monitoring information.

Often, forms and templates are designed to record straightforward numeric data, such as the number of villagers attending meetings, the amount of savings collected, or the number of times community groups have met with government decision-makers. But many CSOs also encourage staff and/or beneficiaries to keep log books, scrap books, journals or diaries to capture facts, thoughts, analyses, quotes, reactions, photographs, descriptions of events, etc. These can be used to record both quantitative and qualitative data.

Another form of recording covers the production of minutes or descriptions of meetings attended by different stakeholders. Meeting minutes can be used to ensure that everyone has the same understanding of the points raised, or agreements made.

Storing information: Some monitoring systems can result in a very large amount of information being collected and recorded. This information needs to be stored appropriately so that it can be retrieved and used for different purposes as and when necessary. The type of storage system depends heavily on the type of information collected. For example:

- numeric data that needs to be processed and analysed may be kept on a spreadsheet or database;
- meeting minutes may only need to be stored so that they can be accessed during the next meeting;
- log books, diaries and journals may need to be accessed at a later date when analysing information in order to produce reports;
- field visit reports need to be stored so that they are available to the person carrying out the next field visit, but may also need to be accessed by staff attempting to analyse common trends; and
- information gathered through interviews and observation may need to be stored so that it can be retrieved when reporting against activity plans or logical frameworks.

Working out what information to store, and how and when to store it, is often the most difficult part of designing a monitoring system.

Analysing information: Analysis processes range from producing tables and graphs that summarise statistical information through to generating lessons and trends from large amounts of qualitative data. Many simple monitoring tools are designed to enable basic data analysis. For example, Gantt charts or other simple monitoring charts are designed to track project and programme activities over time, and compare this with planned or predicted progress.

Sometimes, analysis within a monitoring system is carried out by individuals. At other times CSOs facilitate processes to allow different individuals or groups to jointly analyse and interpret data. This is known as sense-making. Sense-making can happen through a variety of different processes. These include staff meetings, partner meetings, community meetings, stakeholder reviews and workshops. Sense-making can be done on an ongoing basis. But sometimes it is done on a periodic basis. For example, many CSOs conduct analysis meetings on a quarterly, biannual or annual basis to regularly review what is happening within their projects and programmes, and decide what needs to be done about it.

Within programme monitoring, analysis is often quite simple and is based around a series of common questions, like the ones in the box below (see Gosling and Edwards 2003). Many CSOs also develop more specific monitoring or learning questions that can then be used to guide analysis. These questions may be specific to a particular project or programme, or they may be common across many different projects and programmes.

Basic Analysis Questions

- What work has been carried out?
- What work was planned but not done?
- Why was this work not done?
- What problems have been encountered?
- How were these problems addressed (if at all)?
- If they were not addressed, why not?
- What opportunities have been identified?
- What changes have there been in target populations?
- Is the project or programme on track to deliver its objectives?
- Are they still the right objectives?
- What lessons have been learned?
- How can these lessons be applied to future work?
- How has the external situation changed (e.g. political, socio-economic etc.)?
- What immediate adjustments need to be made to plans?
- What longer-term adjustments might need to be made?

Sharing information: Monitoring data, once collected, recorded, stored and analysed, often needs to be shared

with different stakeholders if it is to be useful. These stakeholders may include staff or managers within a project or programme, beneficiaries, partners, donors, or any other kind of stakeholder. It is important to know who needs (or would like) which information, when and where. Otherwise there is a risk of people become overwhelmed with information that they do not need and cannot use.

There are many ways of sharing information – some traditional, some innovative, and some based on modern technology. For example:

- formal or informal reports can be used to disseminate information to different stakeholders (see next section);
- emails are useful for sharing information with different groups of people;
- photographs can be shared with different stakeholders to show activities undertaken or illustrate changes;
- cartoons or pictures are often an effective way of sharing information which has been captured through monitoring processes;
- many organisations produce regular newsletters as part of an ongoing monitoring system;
- blogs – short written pieces that can be used to promote or discuss ideas – are being used more frequently to disseminate or discuss monitoring findings;
- organisations are increasingly using social network sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, which allow information to be shared and discussed; and
- there are a number of other modern methods of sharing information that are becoming more common, such as weblogs, chat rooms and podcasts.

CSOs operating participatory monitoring systems often try to ensure that beneficiaries analyse and use monitoring information alongside project and programme staff. This implies that methods need to be developed to share monitoring information with beneficiaries in a way that they can best comprehend and use. This is often resource intensive, as meetings may need to be held with many different groups of stakeholders – some of whom may be illiterate or semi-literate – in order to ensure they can fully participate within the monitoring process.

Reporting information: Reporting information is just one way of sharing information. Many CSOs have to produce regular reports for donors and/or government agencies, or for their own leaders and Board members. Indeed many CSOs spend a great deal of time producing different reports for different audiences.

Using information: Monitoring information can be used in many ways. The key purpose is to make changes, where necessary, to plans, budgets or targets, or to modify working approaches, especially when projects and programmes are operating in difficult or constantly changing environments.

Many CSOs also consider it important to provide opportunities to discuss findings with all the people who are interested in, or affected by, a project or programme, including beneficiaries. In this way, monitoring data can help CSOs be accountable to their own partners, communities and beneficiaries, as well as donors and supporters.

Monitoring data may also support institutional learning, contribute to marketing and public relations, provide evidence for advocacy, and inform resource allocation decisions. These are all covered in the section of the M&E Universe concerned with data use.

Finally, monitoring information gathered during a project or programme is often used during later evaluations and/or formal reviews. Evaluations and reviews regularly fail, or achieve less than they should, because there is simply not enough good monitoring data to properly judge what progress has been made, or to assess how a CSO contributed to any changes identified.

The balance between monitoring and evaluation

For many years, monitoring has been seen as the '*poor relation*' of evaluation (see Pratt and Boyden 1985, Simister 2000). Evaluation is often seen – especially by donors – as more valid because it is largely conducted by outside experts, using established and transparent methodologies. As a result, a great deal of energy, resources and advice has gone into the field of evaluation, with support for monitoring more limited.

However, in many circumstances monitoring may be more important than evaluation, especially for CSOs that want to learn from their experiences and use this to improve performance. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, monitoring is almost always conducted by in-house project staff, while evaluations are frequently conducted by outside consultants. This means that the monitoring process provides greater opportunities for CSO staff to utilise their own knowledge and experience, while the learning resulting from evaluations is often focused more on the needs and perceptions of outside agencies.

Secondly, because monitoring is a continuous process, rather than a periodic one, it enables adjustments to be made in a timely and methodical way. This means that lessons can be applied immediately rather than waiting months or even years for a formal evaluation to be conducted.

But if monitoring is the more important of the two in many circumstances, it is also more difficult to do well (Gosling and Edwards 2003). This is because it relies on a system, rather than being a one-off task carried out by a dedicated team or individual. To serve a useful purpose, this system needs to generate information that is relevant, accurate and timely for a range of different stakeholders. This is often a difficult exercise, especially as many CSO staff engaged in monitoring are not M&E specialists.

There are signs that the balance between monitoring and evaluation is slowly shifting, especially with the new emphasis on adaptive management (covered by a separate paper in the M&E Universe). This is being driven by two main things.

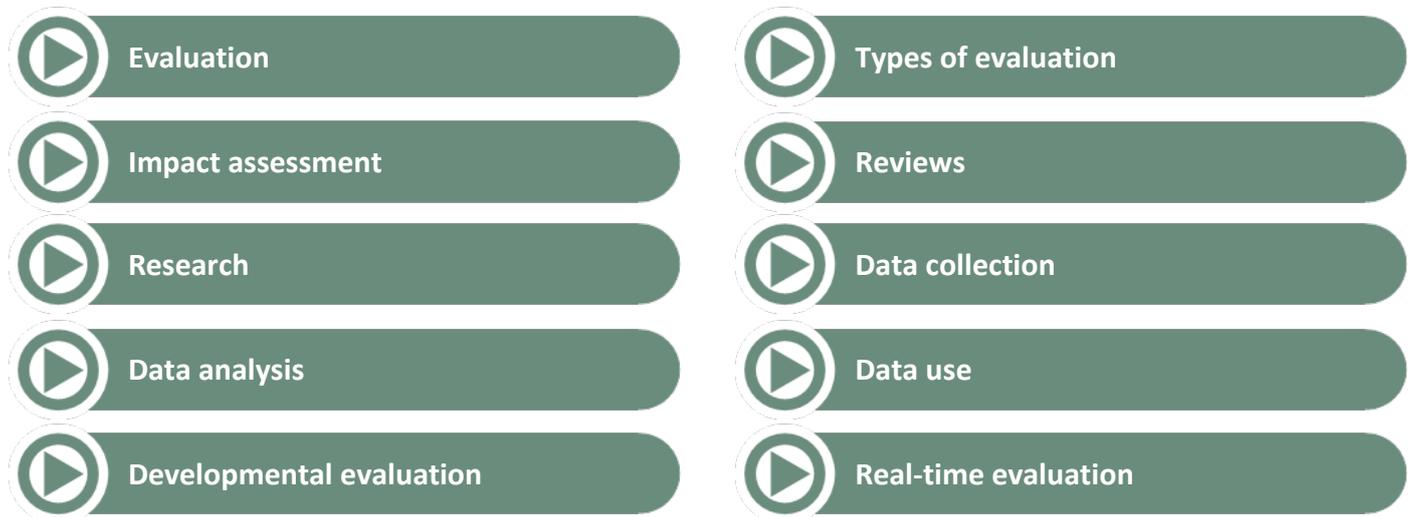
- Firstly, there is a greater understanding of complexity in development. In complex projects and programmes it is impossible to accurately predict at the start when and how activities will lead to outputs and then outcomes. Instead, constant assessment and re-assessment is needed to react to different circumstances. This implies that ongoing monitoring may be more useful than periodic evaluation.
- Secondly, advances in technology mean it is now possible to monitor change cheaply and quickly in ways

which would not have been possible even ten years ago. Information that was only previously collected at the beginning and end of projects can now be collected and analysed on an ongoing basis using mobile phones and tablets.

One interesting new development is the movement to incorporate ongoing assessment into evaluations. Two types of evaluation – developmental evaluation and real-time evaluation – can both be seen as attempts to merge the disciplines of monitoring and evaluation to get the best of both worlds; rigorous information on change, collected in a timely manner to support internal staff to make real-time adjustments to projects and programmes.

Further reading and resources

This section of the M&E Universe contains papers on evaluations, different types of evaluation, impact assessment, review and research. Other sections of the M&E Universe cover data collection, analysis and use. Two specific forms of evaluation with relevance to monitoring – developmental evaluation and real-time evaluation – can also be accessed through the links below.



A useful publication covering monitoring as well as evaluation is a guidebook produced by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (see <http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/monitoring/IFRC-ME-Guide-8-2011.pdf>). Other books covering monitoring systems for CSOs include Gosling and Edwards (2003) (see below) and the INTRAC book 'Sharpening the Development Process' by Bakewell et. al. (2003). This can be purchased via the INTRAC website.

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INTRAC is a not-for-profit organisation that builds the skills and knowledge of civil society organisations to be more effective in addressing poverty and inequality. Since 1992 INTRAC has provided specialist support in monitoring and evaluation, working with people to develop their own M&E approaches and tools, based on their needs. We encourage appropriate and practical M&E, based on understanding what works in different contexts.

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