

PARTICIPATORY MONITORING & EVALUATION: LEARNING FROM CHANGE

Summary:

Development organisations need to know how effective their efforts have been. But who should make these judgements, and on what basis? Usually it is outside experts who take charge. Participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) is a different approach which involves local people, development agencies, and policy makers deciding together how progress should be measured, and results acted upon. It can reveal valuable lessons and improve accountability. However, it is a challenging process for all concerned since it encourages people to examine their assumptions about what constitutes progress, and to face up to the contradictions and conflicts that can emerge.

Why the interest in PM&E?

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is vital if governments and aid organisations are to judge whether development efforts have succeeded or failed. Conventionally, it has involved outside experts coming in to measure performance against pre-set indicators, using standardised procedures and tools.

Participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) has emerged because of a recognition of the limitations of this conventional approach. It is attracting interest from many quarters since it offers new ways of assessing and learning from change that are more inclusive, and more in tune with the views and aspirations of those most directly affected. This shift in thinking has been prompted by:

- *the surge of interest of participatory appraisal and planning, a set of new approaches which stress the importance of taking local people's perspectives into account;*
- *pressure for greater accountability, especially at a time of scarce resources;*
- *the shift within organisations, particularly in the private sector, towards reflecting more on their own experiences, and learning from them.*

PM&E provides an opportunity for development organisations to focus better on their ultimate goal of improving poor people's lives. By broadening involvement in identifying and analysing change, a clearer picture can be gained of what is really happening on the ground. It allows people to celebrate successes, and learn from failures. For those involved, it can also be a very empowering process, since it puts them in charge, helps develop skills, and shows that their views count.

Beyond the conventional approach

PM&E differs from conventional monitoring and evaluation approaches in several important ways:

	Conventional M&E	Participatory M&E
Who plans and manages the process:	Senior managers, or outside experts	Local people, project staff, managers, and other stakeholders, often helped by a

		facilitator	
Role of 'primary stakeholders' (the intended beneficiaries):	Provide information only	Design and adapt the methodology, collect and analyse data, share findings and link them to action	
How success is measured:	Externally-defined, mainly quantitative indicators	Internally-defined indicators, including more qualitative judgements	
Approach:	Predetermined	Adaptive	

What is PM&E?

PM&E is not just a matter of using participatory techniques within a conventional monitoring and evaluation setting. It is about radically rethinking who initiates and undertakes the process, and who learns or benefits from the findings.

Early examples of PM&E date back to the 1970s. There are many different forms depending on who is participating, at what stages they are involved, and the precise objectives. Community-based versions, where local people are the primary focus, sit alongside other forms geared to engaging lower level staff in assessing the effectiveness of their organisation, and working out how it can be improved. At the heart of PM&E, however, are four broad principles:

- **'Participation'** - which means opening up the design of the process to include those most directly affected, and agreeing to analyse data together;
- The inclusiveness of PM&E requires **'negotiation'** to reach agreement about what will be monitored or evaluated, how and when data will be collected and analysed, what the data actually means, and how findings will be shared, and action taken;
- This leads to **'learning'** which becomes the basis for subsequent improvement and corrective action;
- Since the number, role, and skills of stakeholders, the external environment, and other factors change over time, **'flexibility'** is essential.

A wide range of methods and tools have been developed to carry out PM&E. They all seek to compare the situation before and after a particular project, or set of events. They include home-made questionnaires and scientific measurement techniques adapted for use by local people, as well as more innovative methods such as oral histories, and the use of photos, video and theatre.

Practical applications

PM&E is being used for many purposes. Some governments and aid organisations are using it a way of becoming more accountable, by giving intended beneficiaries the chance to speak out about local impacts. At a community level, PM&E is being used to help motivate people to sustain local initiatives and manage conflicts. Banks and other large commercial enterprises are employing similar approaches to assess their ethical and environmental performance, for instance through social audits. The following examples illustrate the range of application.

Getting the right end of the stick in Zambia

CARE Zambia, a non-governmental development agency, wanted to implement projects in a more responsive manner, and ensure they learned better from their own project experience. First, a baseline was established in dozens of villages using wellbeing ranking and other participatory methods. Now changes are being tracked in the best and worst-off households to assess project impact and help plan new initiatives. Joint analysis has helped communities and staff define - rather than just speculate about - changes, and has encouraged communities to take action on their own.

Steps and methods

Methods commonly used include:

maps: to show the location and types of changes in the area being monitored.

Venn diagrams: to show changes in relationships between groups, institutions, and individuals.

flow diagrams: to show direct and indirect impacts of changes, and to relate them to causes.

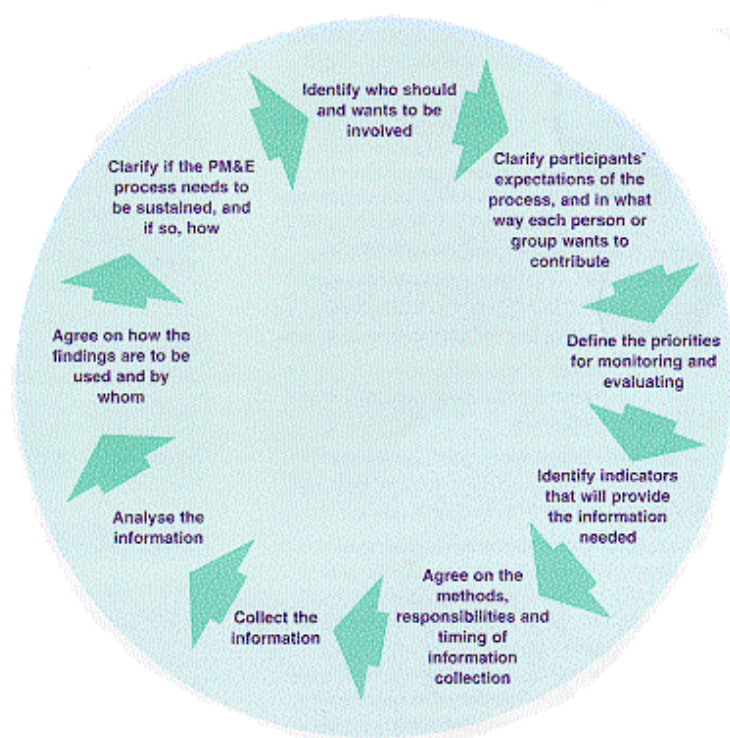
diaries: to describe changes in the lives of individuals or groups.

photographs: to depict changes through a sequence of images.

matrix scoring: to compare people's preferences for a set of options or outcomes.

network diagrams: to show changes in the type and degree of contact between people and services.

Most PM&E processes involve a sequence of steps



* For example, similar sequences have been used by the International Institute for Environment and Development, Greening Australia, the New Economics Foundation, and the University of Tennessee's Community Partnership Center Learning Initiative.

Defining sustainability

The international conservation organisation, IUCN, is testing alternatives to the usual top-down approaches to assessing sustainability. One alternative invites local people to score the health of their community and ecosystem on a 'sustainability barometer'. It can be a revealing process. In a pilot study in India, villagers generated their own evidence showing dwindling natural resource stocks. This led them to rethink long-held assumptions about the abundance of natural resources, and prompted them to take steps to address key problems, particularly water scarcity.

Assessing a US Federal programme

In the USA, 'citizen learning teams' have been involved in monitoring and evaluating a large government programme for community revitalisation of distressed areas. Working with researchers, local volunteers selected which goals to track,

decided how to measure progress, and provided ongoing feedback to local leaders and government funding agencies. In one area, people hit on the idea of using telephone directories and newspapers to measure the level of community capacity. By looking at changes over time in entries relating to 15 community sectors, they found many more signs of a dynamic community than they had previously assumed, and were able to use this knowledge to target program funding.

Supporting indigenous governance in Colombia

In Colombia, ACIN, an association of indigenous people covering 13 communities, is involved in monitoring and evaluating its own multi-sectoral regional development plan. They are looking at links between productivity and environmental and cultural factors, tracking changes over time and comparing plans with results in a systematic way. This has helped communities recognise their strengths and improve their management capabilities, which, in turn, is leading to changes in power relationships. Links are being made between communities, providing the concerted voice needed in negotiations with national and provincial government, and the private sector.

Tracking Agenda 21 changes in the UK

The 'Local Agenda 21' initiative in the UK aims to make communities more sustainable. Developing appropriate indicators is seen as an essential part of this. Research by the New Economics Foundation shows that indicators work best when they are developed in participatory ways. In communities of all kinds, 'everyday experts' are getting involved in the monitoring and evaluation process, and results are starting to change policy. For example, Lancashire County Council is using locally defined indicators to pin-point hot spots of social exclusion and reallocate resources. Home-made indicators have also provided surprise evidence of massive increases in childhood asthma, and unearthed other problems.

Sustaining the process

Such examples show how PM&E has created new ways of measuring change, while helping build the monitoring and evaluation capacity of the people involved. Nevertheless, problems have been encountered. Common mistakes are:

- *assuming that all stakeholders will be interested in taking part;*
- *imposing inappropriate indicators and methods in an effort to standardise and save time;*
- *being unclear about how information will be used, and by whom; collecting unnecessary information;*
- *starting too big, too soon.*

Opening up the assessment process to a wider range of stakeholders may also expose conflicts over what is most important, how it should be tracked, and whether goals are being met. Failure to predict and deal with conflict can lead to frustration. When carried out well, however, PM&E can provide a framework for clarifying and negotiating differences between stakeholders and developing a consensus on what the priorities are.

PM&E is not just a research process, therefore; it is a social, political and cultural one, too. To be sustainable it requires openness, a willingness to listen to different points of view, a recognition of the knowledge and role of different participants, and an ability to give credit where credit is due.

Selecting the best indicators

Indicators are central to most monitoring and evaluation processes. They can be qualitative or quantitative, and provide a way of spotting and measuring underlying trends. In Uganda, for example, the number of households eating 'beer bananas' is an indicator of hunger, since this type of bananas is only eaten during times of food shortage.

Selecting the best indicators is not always easy:

- *it is a balancing act between choosing locally-relevant factors, and those that can be applied more widely;*
- *the more stakeholders that are involved, the longer the process of selecting indicators can take;*

- *indicators should capture intangible as well as tangible changes, particularly in projects that value factors such as personal and social development. For example, the InterAmerican Foundation uses an approach that encourages the inclusion of indicators such as 'cultural identity', 'self-esteem', and 'degree of civil responsibility'.*

Implications for development agencies

Most development organisations are well aware of the shortcomings of conventional M&E approaches. The promise of better performance evaluation, and the positive impact it can have on those who take part, is encouraging many of them to try PM&E. But it is no easy option. It can also provoke more far-reaching changes than realised.

For organisations supporting participatory development, monitoring and evaluating throws up a particular challenge. Although there have been attempts to develop standardised indicators, these are bound to be problematic, since the quality of participation can only really be assessed through a process which is itself participatory.

PM&E can only thrive in organisations willing to review their procedures and attitudes, and change them where necessary. Flexibility and patience are essential, since more time is needed to design and adapt the process than when standard procedures are used. Organisations need to create this space if PM&E is to work.

With many governments and development agencies favouring devolution and decentralisation, PM&E has an increasing role to play. If responsibility is to become more localised, and based on the diverse needs and priorities of local communities, progress can no longer be measured using standardised top-down indicators. New, more versatile, and more devolved processes are required to track and assess change.

Two main challenges stand out if PM&E is to flourish. First, bringing together people's different ways of looking at the world challenges established notions of what constitutes rigorous data collection and analysis. Conventional concepts of validity and reliability of data are being questioned as methods are combined in new ways and 'experts' interact more with local people. Adopting PM&E requires the acceptance of new, less rigid, standards of credibility of information, and a appreciation of when information is 'good enough' for the task at hand - rather than being perfect.

The second challenge is in scaling up the process, especially in cases when PM&E is being introduced into projects and programmes that themselves are not participatory. In such situations, there is a much more of a learning process to go through. Experience suggests that it is best to start small and create opportunities for PM&E to be tested before it is introduced more widely. A trial phase helps staff and other stakeholders come to grips with the new approach and its implications. During this phase it may make sense to use PM&E in parallel with conventional M&E processes, rather than as a substitute. Having a high level 'champion' can also be a big advantage, someone in authority who can create room to manoeuvre while experiments take place, and who understands that making mistakes is an important part of the learning process. Training is another key ingredient. It is required at all levels, from villagers right through to senior management. As well as concepts and methods, training needs to address questions of behaviour and attitudes, since these are crucial to any participatory process.

PM&E offers an opportunity to redefine development and its impacts, and create a communication channel between those in power and those living with the consequences of development decisions. But to be meaningful, policy makers and development agencies must recognise that their plans and programmes might be fundamentally challenged, and be prepared to respond accordingly.

Further reading

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- Estrella, M. et al, editors (forthcoming) 'Learning from change: Issues and experience in participatory monitoring and evaluation', London: IT Publications IIED, 1998, Special Issue on participatory monitoring and evaluation. *PLA Notes 31*, London: IIED

- NEF, 1998, 'Communities Count! A step by step guide to community sustainability indicators', London: NEF

Useful web sites:

More information on participation and PM&E is available on the IDS web site, at: www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip

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