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Take a look below and see what we might be able to do for you!

Each year our Annual Report contains a Lessons Learned section. 2009 considered Children at Risk. In 2010 we looked at Monitoring Criteria, Do No Harm analysis, and the 2005 *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* signed by 120 countries – not forgetting the follow-up *Accra Agenda to Accelerate Progess*. In 2011 we applied these criteria to Results-Oriented Monitoring. The 2012 report looks at participatory action-research methodologies in project monitoring. You can consult the reports on our website **www.epesmandala.com**

What is Monitoring?

Monitoring checks that programme activities yield expected results: are schools being built, teachers trained, students recruited, and so forth according to plan? EPES Mandala proposes a participatory approach, involving all programme stakeholders and beneficiaries includes not only village chiefs, but also women, handicapped people, and youth groups in poor communities that are not necessarily set beside the tarmac road.

We use a set of Six-Plus-Five criteria, drawn from OECD, from the Paris Declaration, and from our own long experience on the front line of sustainable development and humanitarian relief work. The first set of six Criteria we assess in a monitoring mission are pretty standard recommendations from the EU and OECD:

1- Relevance and quality of the design of a project: defined as the appropriateness of project objectives to real problems and needs of the intended target groups that the project is supposed to address. Different groups may have very different but equally legitimate needs: if you are digging a well for drinking water, the women may irrigate their gardens while doctors fight gastric disease.

2- Efficiency: whether results were obtained at reasonable cost. Are resources and activities converted into good quality results? This includes accounting and logistics, of course, but it is not just about running an efficient office. Monitoring results is not the same as a financial audit.

3- Effectiveness: how effective has been the contribution made by the project's results to the achievement of the project purpose? Many project officers, including military officers, are so obsessed by 'efficiency' that they miss the wider picture: how well does the efficiently-run weapon control project actually control weapons? How long will it take to be effective? Years of development experience show that 7+ year projects have impact, while 3-year projects are a waste of money.

4- Impact: the project's contribution to wider overall objectives. Impacts can be positive or negative, unintended as well as planned. For example, children can attend school (a result) without learning anything (little impact). Donors often build schools, without thinking of teacher salaries, training or even (for example for girls in Afghanistan) how to ensure the attendance of children.

5- Sustainability: will the stream of benefits continue after external support has ended? Donors have a very short attention-span; good programmes are often sabotaged by a donor's own lack of sustainability. Projects may not sustainable because of the lack of local resources when the donor pulls out, or because of local government policy.

6- Do No Harm: we add this because any donor should ensure that their intervention does no harm. Food distribution may arrive late and destroy local food markets. In refugee centers, male planners often ignore women's protection: it can involve simple precautions like building latrines where girls will not get raped at night. Vulnerable refugees (women heads of household, pregnant and elderly refugees) often lose half their food rations as payment to the young men sent to carry them. Donor officials filled with goodwill - but far from the heat of the front line - would be shocked to discover how often their projects actually do harm!

Result Oriented Monitoring of a Project supporting feminine entrepreneurship in West Republic of Guinea

Plus Five covering joint progress toward enhanced Aid Effectiveness (in Paris and Accra)

1- Ownership: Developing countries set their own strategies for poverty reduction, improve their institutions and tackle corruption…. and donors should respect national strategies. Standard World Bank remedies have provided too many examples of doing harm (like increasing fertilizer prices without warning farmers).

2- Alignment: Donor countries should align behind national objectives and use local systems, rather than imposing Western models that do not always work very brilliantly even in the home country (like imposing American 'democracy' on Afghanistan).

3- Harmonisation: Donor countries should coordinate, simplify procedures and share information with the host country and with each other, in order to avoid duplication and waste.

4- Results: Developing countries and donors should shift focus to measurable development results (with both quantitative and qualitative methods for measurement, since numbers alone cannot tell the story).

5- Mutual Accountability: Donors and partners should be equally accountable for development results: accountable to the beneficiaries, to the tax payers, and to each other (something organizations from the North often find very difficult to handle, especially when bureaucracy obstructs development objectives).

What is evaluation?

An evaluation looks at project performance, results and impacts; but who does the looking? An outside expert must be someone who knows the field, speaks the language, and has real experience of managing and funding projects. EPES Mandala has these people – we are not academics or bureaucrats, but strong development professionals.

Should the evaluator(s) stay for a day or a month? Can you use a participative process involving all the actors and players, and the funders? Evaluation at its best combines experiences of women and men together. Here are simple images to help readers see what M&E systems should do.

The Quick and Informal Snapshot
ROM (results-oriented monitoring described in our 2011 Annual Report) provides a project snapshot. ROM gives very good value for money, but any 3-day M&E visit is bound to remain superficial.

The Photo Series
An external evaluator's report is like a series of integrated snapshots that tell a story and offer insights to project managers and funders. Provided you choose the right evaluator(s) they can enrich a project's awareness of its progress, testing its strengths and weaknesses - but the evaluation is often ignored by the actors.

The Formal Studio Set
The project Logframe (logical framework) acts like a stage-set, provides structure for an evaluation, defines limits, measurable objectives and the expected results to be evaluated. A Logframe is prepared before work begins in the field; it needs up-dating as things change and the project evolves. Often the Logframe leaves out important elements: like unexpected results and hidden impacts an external evaluator may miss.

The Family Video

In-built M&E systems that generate regular data, follow Logframe guidelines and provide a 'video' of project progress. The external evaluator then acts like a 'freeze' button, allowing project staff and stakeholders to focus on one frame, then on a series of frames – each offering new insights. But still within the Logframe.

The Film Series

To achieve a more intimate understanding of progress, we recommend a built-in, participative action-research methodology that involves all the actors. Like the television viewer watching a series, action-research brings familiarity with the issues and the people, enriching understanding. AR is the *Downton Abbey* of M&E, taking project analysis beyond the Logframe and bringing new insights from women, youths, fieldworkers…

We have the people who can help you set up innovative M&E. Our evaluation team can bring your staff the skills your programmes need to be effective in the modern world. Action-Research could be a part of your M&E strategy. A strategic partnership with EPES Mandala will add value to your work, improve your impact and impress your stakeholders.

What is Action-Research?

AR is both a philosophy and a monitoring-evaluation methodology. We believe that development should use rules of democratic governance: meaning that your managers will use participative techniques at every stage from project conception, through implementation until the final evaluation. Every action generates data (or should do) that stimulate analysis and research by programme managers and by the actors themselves. Research need not be complicated: sometimes there is a short survey, at other times it simply means talking to women or running a focus group with adolescents who provide new insights. The research informs and improves on-going action, which in turn suggests further areas for research. There is a 'zig-zag' relationship between the Action and the Research which should infuse and improve the programme, allowing managers and evaluators to understand what is working and what is not … and – most importantly - why not.
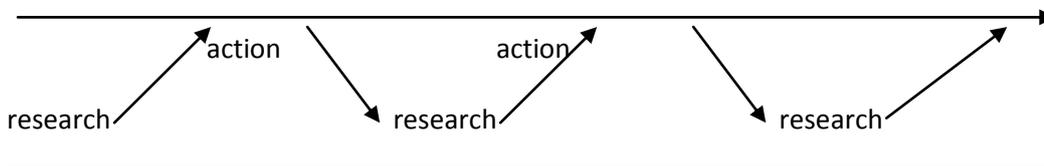
With a minimum amount of organised record-keeping, project workers and community leaders can generate useful data, and analyse the results together on a half-yearly basis. This process turns all the actors into participants in monitoring-evaluation, forcing them to analyse problems and understand their causes. The AR process increases awareness among civil society leaders, as well as project managers.

Project reports are much more interesting to read, when the causes of success and failure are explained using the words of the beneficiaries. Their words explain what the statistics mean.

Lessons Learned from Action-Research.
Participatory processes often reveal different results to an external evaluation. The results of a logframe analysis may not be wrong, but they are often incomplete because project designers ask different questions to those of the population. And often Logframes are out of date by the time of evaluation, especially if the project takes several years to get up and running.

External evaluators talk to village leaders; the insights of women are often ignored - but not by EPES Mandala evaluators, for we make sure we reach out to hear the views of women, youths, minorities and other 'forgotten' groups. Women should be heard without their men, so they can speak their minds. Who can identify the risk factors for rape and sexual violence, if not local women who have been victims? The best judges of police protection, are the vulnerable members of society (the poor and minority ethnic groups and migrants who are seldom consulted during planning or evaluation). Who can identify drug and arms smugglers or child-traffickers, better than market women who know everyone in the district and who see everything?

Paticipatory methods create a 'video' of project activities and achievements. Good evaluators 'freeze the frame' and stimulate insightful discussions - provided everyone is well-prepared. Action-Research (in French *recherche-action*) creates a whole film series and reveals varied points of view : our image of *Downton Abbey* is useful, because viewers of a TV series get to know all the characters personally. This not possible in a snapshot, but becomes possible by Action-Research involving women and girls in the M&E process, as well as young men and old men, traders and policemen, government officials and donor agencies.

A final word about 'baseline surveys'. Investing in baseline data is only justified, if a programme is going to last for fifteen years or longer. Most projects are funded for periods too short for a baseline to have meaning. In post-conflict disarmament – like fighting drugs or sexual abuse - statistics are unreliable : weapons and explosives are hidden, just as no one willingly talks about drugs deals, domestic violence and rape. Action-research generates information collected from the community that can substitute for a baseline survey, making evaluations unusually insightful.

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