Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation

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Participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) is a process of self-assessment, knowledge generation, and collective action in which stakeholders in a program or intervention collaboratively define the evaluation issues, collect and analyze data, and take action as a result of what they learn through this process (Jackson & Kassam, 1998). It is fundamentally about sharing knowledge—among beneficiaries of the program, program implementers, funders, and often outside evaluation practitioners. Monitoring calls for on-going documentation of the specifics of program implementation so that results can be explained in light of program processes. Evaluating calls for judgments about the effectiveness and sustainability of the program. Philosophically, participatory monitoring and evaluation seeks to honor the perspectives, voices, preferences and decisions of the least powerful and most affected stakeholders—the local beneficiaries. All too often, evaluation is something done to beneficiaries; participatory approaches argue that evaluation should be done with these key groups.

Development practitioners identify several benefits associated with PM&E. First, by involving those directly affected, a more clear picture of what is actually happening in a program can be drawn—both successes and failures. Second, key stakeholder groups may feel empowered through participating in the process—they share responsibility for the evaluation processes and results. Third, there is potential to develop capacity and skills in evaluation generally; these can then be applied to other programs and activities. Fourth, when information is generated as a routine part of program operations, there is greater likelihood that this information will be used directly to make mid-course corrections and modifications as the program is implemented. Fifth, there is substantial benefit for team building and creating commitment through collaborative inquiry. And, finally, the learning associated with participating in such a process is experiential and can bring a deep sense of meaningfulness to the work.

PM&E is grounded in five general principles (IDS, online, 1998). The first is participation—creating structures and processes that include those most directly affected by the program and often those most frequently powerless and/or voiceless in program design and implementation. The second is negotiation—a commitment to working through different views (with the potential for conflict and disagreement) about what the evaluation should focus on, how it should be conducted and used, and what actions should result. The third is that these participatory processes lead to learning among all participants which, when shared, leads to corrective action and program improvement. The fourth is that, given changing circumstances, people, and skills available for the process, flexibility is required. As circumstances change, those involved in and affected by the evaluation should be committed to modifying their strategies to achieve desired results—knowledge that will shape effective and sustainable programs. The fifth principle is that PM&E is quintessentially methodologically eclectic. Practitioners can draw on a wide variety of methods to generate information. Beneficiaries can invent some and use local processes that are relevant and heuristic. PM&E is not, however, just a bag of tricks or tools; it is a philosophy, an overall approach to organizational learning that fosters the involvement of those most directly affected.

PM&E can be used effectively within development agencies' needs for accountability (Jackson, 1998). The shift in many aid agencies to results-oriented management of programs provides an opportunity to implement PM&E being mindful of both external and internal contexts. Accountability, from this perspective, is defined as accepting responsibility for the conduct and results of a specific program. This entails awareness of and responsiveness to demands emanating from the external context (funding agency's strategic objectives, for example) as well as those...
offered by program beneficiaries for improvement in their living circumstances. Program managers and participants are responsible to those who fund programs but are equally responsible to themselves for the achievement of results articulated by beneficiaries. We conceptualize PM&E as occurring within an accountability field or arena. Within this field are many voices, sometimes speaking in concert; other times, in opposition. The challenge of PM&E is to negotiate these differences so that data are gathered that are relevant, timely, valid, and heuristic for these various stakeholder groups.

The fundamental processes of PM&E are as follows:

1. To collectively and collaboratively identify key objectives or outcomes for the program to achieve;
2. To identify relevant indicators that document changes in a specific condition and signal progress towards the objective;
3. To identify and gather data that measures or describes the condition and can give evidence of progress;
4. To identify baseline conditions and benchmarks of progress towards the achievement of the objective;
5. To collectively gather those data; analyze and interpret them; and draw conclusions based on those interpretations; and
6. To take corrective action to better achieve the objectives.

This process can also be conceptualized as a cycle of inquiry. Paolo Freire's praxis cycle (action-reflection-action; 1970) is a close cousin, as is action research and other forms of collaborative inquiry (see, especially, Cousins & Earl, 1992; Fetterman, 1996). Throughout the process, the goal is to try to achieve a balance of power and voice among the various participant groups. Negotiating differences and honoring human resources and cultural knowledge are central to this goal.

Given this conceptualization of PM&E, the role of the outside evaluator shifts. No longer is this person cast as the expert who conducts the evaluation on program beneficiaries or who extracts information from them. The outside evaluator becomes a coach, a facilitator, a critical friend (Rallis & Rossman, 2000). The skills demanded of this role are not merely technical although the participatory evaluator must have technical skills. More important are interpersonal skills, including skill in negotiating difference and resolving conflict.

Many examples abound of participatory evaluations conducted with sustained participation by those most affected by the program. Various website, moreover, discuss the issues surrounding PM&E and offer examples of successful as well as problematic participatory evaluations. International case examples can be found in Jackson and Kassam (1998); excellent websites include the Institute of Development Studies [www.ids.ac.uk].

References


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