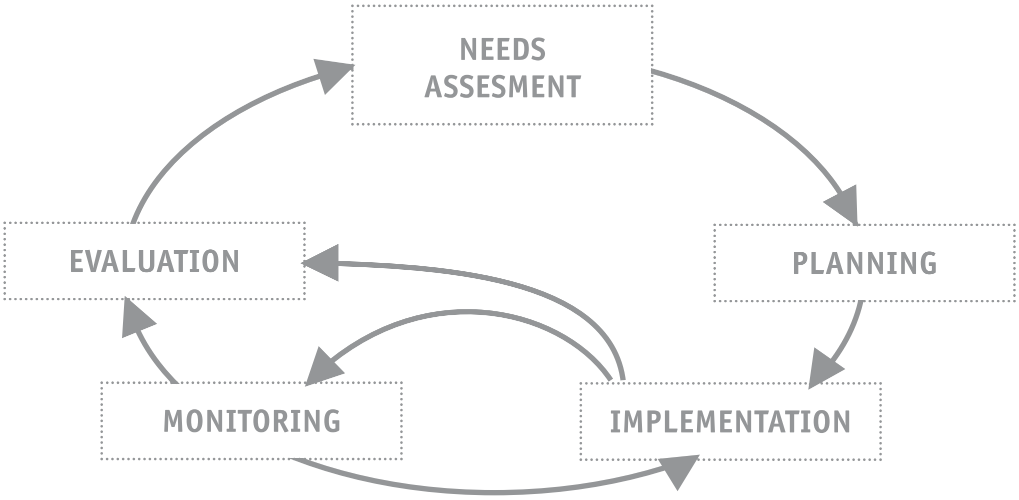
6. A framework to plan monitoring and evaluation

Key ideas

- Monitoring and evaluation should be an integral part of (and therefore affect) all stages of the project cycle.

As mentioned earlier, you need to plan your monitoring and evaluation. This section is about helping you to go about it. For the purposes of this handbook, we talk about monitoring and evaluation as if they were special kinds of activities within the project. However, monitoring and evaluation should really be an integral part of all phases of the project cycle. If you like, they should be mainstreamed into it. Here's a picture of how we see the project cycle. There exist as many descriptions of project cycles as there are organizations on Earth, each one slightly different from the other. Ours is just another approach. However, we think that the basic concepts are generally the same and that the model sketched out below will also be useful to organizations using a slightly different one.

The idea is to go through each step of the project cycle and to see how the fact that you are actually monitoring and evaluating your project will change it; in other words, how you will take monitoring and evaluation into consideration at all stages of the project cycle.



Monitoring, evaluation and project planning

Key ideas

- Monitoring and evaluating projects is much easier if you have clear and appropriate objectives and a clear plan of action.
- Preventing substance abuse would normally be your goal, while addressing different risk and protective factors would normally become your objectives.
- Your objectives should be **S.M.A.R.T.**, that is, **S**PECIFIC (clearly identify the target group and the desired change in the target group), **M**EASURABLE, **A**CHIEVABLE, **R**ELEVANT (address risk and protective factors pertaining to the particular target group) and **T**IME-BOUND.
- Your plan of action should include monitoring and evaluation as separate groups of activities.

Let's assume for the moment that your organization has already conducted a needs assessment: it has just collected and analysed information on the problem(s) of the community, the resources available and the lessons learned from previous projects of this kind and from this geographical area. In other words, your organization has at its disposal all the information to start its planning process, that is, to decide what should be done and to what end. Your planning process will be crucial for monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring is about assessing whether your activities are going as intended. Therefore, if you have a clear plan of action, it will be much easier for you to monitor whether you are on the right track. Evaluating is about assessing whether you achieved what you wanted to achieve. Therefore, if you have set your objectives clearly and appropriately, it will be much easier to assess whether you have been more or less successful. We have found setting objectives one of the most difficult things to do in project management, so we will devote a bit more space to it.

Setting your objectives

It is not a good idea to set objectives that your project will not be able to achieve (because it is too small, too short, etc.). Your evaluation would show that you had not been able to achieve your objectives (which you probably knew beforehand) and you would probably not learn that much from the process (and be very disappointed).

What you might want to do is set a longer-term goal for your project. You know already that the project will not be able to achieve it, but you also know that your project will be a step in the right direction. In the case of a small organization doing substance abuse prevention, this will often mean stating that preventing substance abuse is your goal, not your objective. Your project is too small to prevent substance abuse on its own, but it is a step in that direction. This will leave you free to set objectives that are achievable during the life of the project. As we discussed before, you can think of substance abuse prevention as a group of activities addressing different risk and protective factors. Therefore, you could think of your objectives as changing the situation of your target group or community in terms of different risk and protective factors.

It would also be a good idea to set your objectives so that they are **S.M.A.R.T.**, that means, **S**PECIFIC, **M**EASURABLE, **A**CHIEVABLE, **R**ELEVANT and **T**IME-BOUND. If you have set your objectives according to the discussion above, you should already be in a good position. In fact, you would have chosen objectives that are **A**CHIEVABLE by the end of the project (that's the **T**IME BOUNDARY)!

If you are serious about setting objectives that are **A**CHIEVABLE and **T**IME-BOUND, this will also have a consequence. Depending on your budget and time frame, you might have very few objectives, maybe only one. Very often, in setting objectives, we succumb to the "I want to save the entire world" syndrome and set a long list of objectives that are more an expression of what we "would like to" achieve, than what we "will be able to" achieve. Although they might not look impressive, remember that, in the long run, by setting only objectives that will be within the reach of the project, your project and organization will gain in credibility, during both the planning and the evaluation stages.

An objective that is **R**ELEVANT contributes to the overall mission or goal of a team. In our case, as we are implementing substance abuse prevention projects, this means contributing to the goal of substance abuse prevention. As we said, prevention is about addressing the risk and protective factors of a target group or community. There is usually more than one risk and protective factor that needs to be addressed, and the risk and protective factors that are relevant for one target group or community are not necessarily relevant for another. Therefore, to repeat, for an objective to be **R**ELEVANT in our context, it should be an objective that contributes to substance abuse prevention. It might be a silly example, but although treating drug addicts is a laudable objective and is necessary, it is not a substance abuse prevention objective. The second criterion for **R**ELEVANCE, in our context, is that the activity should address the risk and protective factors that are relevant to the particular community or target group. If your target group is street children and they are sniffing glue because they are cold and hungry, and you have to choose one objective, providing them with information about the dangers of substances is not the most **R**ELEVANT one. Providing them with shelter and food would be a more **R**ELEVANT objective, because that is their primary risk factor. In reality, in each community or target group, the initiation of substance abuse is bound to be caused by more than one factor, and each objective in a prevention project should address one risk or protective factor.

We have the A (**A**CHIEVABLE), the T (**T**IME-BOUND) and the R (**R**ELEVANT) ... we are missing the S. Your objectives should be **SPECIFIC**, that is, they should define the target group in specific terms (for example, including the age of your target group members) and the change that you want to see in the life of the target group by the end of the project.

Finally, you will want to make your objectives **M**EASURABLE. If you have taken care that your objectives are **A**CHIEVABLE, **T**IME-BOUND and **S**PECIFIC, you will have done most of the work already. It might be difficult at this stage to express an objective in a way that is measurable right at the beginning. However, it is something you might want to come back to once you have thought through your activities, how you will monitor them, how you will evaluate them and therefore how you will assess whether you have achieved your objectives or not.

An example of setting objectives and making them S.M.A.R.T.

Juana and Maria undertook a needs assessment to identify the risk and protective factors that needed to be addressed and the resources they had at their disposal. They identified three risk factors: young people had too much idle time on their hands, they had too easy access to alcohol and parents did not have any idea how to talk to their children about substance abuse.

*Juana had good contacts with the parish and Maria was a teacher and very active in the parent-teacher association. They were both parents themselves, so they decided that, to start with, it would be good to do something about parents having information and the ability to talk with their children about substance abuse.They knew that it was **R**ELEVANT, because it was based on their needs assessment and addressed a recognized risk factor.*

*They needed to make it **S**PECIFIC. Who would be their target group? The parents of the community. Would this be **A**CHIEVABLE? Well, that would depend on how long they could work and with how much money. They had no funds, however, and though they could organize some activities themselves, they knew they needed to demonstrate that they were able to achieve something soon so they could raise additional funds. They decided to target parents of 12 to 14-year-olds in the parish they belonged to (the most critical age in their community) and to accomplish their objective within two years. That made the objective **A**CHIEVABLE, **S**PECIFIC and **T**IME-BOUND in one go.*

*Was it **M**EASURABLE? Well, if they managed to reach all the parents in that category, they could easily measure whether the parents they had reached had learned something about substance abuse. It would have been enough to do a short quiz before and after the* *seminars they intended to organize. How would they measure whether parents had improved their communication with their children about substance abuse? They felt that it would be difficult to measure this through a written questionnaire. However, they could get together with a few of the parents before and after the sessions to discuss the issue and see if they had made any progress and why. They concluded that this was indeed a **M**EASURABLE objective.*

So this became their objective: "The parents of 12 to 14-year-olds in our parish will have better knowledge about substance abuse and will be more able to talk about substance abuse with their children".

This example is invented, but is based on actual practice.

The plan of action

In setting your objectives, you will probably already have in mind what you want to do to achieve them, that is, you will already have an idea of what your activities will be. However, if you systematize your idea of what the activities will be into a proper plan of action, you will find it helpful on a number of counts. A plan of action normally lists activities in chronological order against the objective they will help achieve. Moreover, for each activity, the plan will indicate when it will happen and for how long, who will be in charge of the activity, who will be involved in its implementation and what they will do. There will be an indication of what will be needed to implement the activity, in terms of materials and/or funds. Finally, the plan will indicate how many people will be targeted, of which age and gender, and the relevant socio-economic characteristics.

A plan of action is useful in itself because it makes it easier to present the way the project intends to reach its objectives to stakeholders and prospective donors. Moreover, later on, while you are implementing your activities, it will be easier to monitor them, because you will have a clear picture against which to judge what is happening in the reality of your project. A good plan will go a long way towards making your monitoring smoother.

Some project formats require that you identify intermediate elements between your objectives (the change that you hope to see in your target group) and your activities (what you are going to do to make that change happen). These elements are sometimes called "outputs", "benchmarks" or "outcomes". Many organizations even call them "objectives", but in a more specific sense than the objectives we have discussed above. In general, they indicate something specific that the project must produce in order to achieve the objectives. For example, let's say your objective is to give the teachers of our school more accurate information about substance abuse. You would have two outputs, the training materials and the training workshops that you need in order to achieve this objective. To deliver those outputs, you would have a series of activities. For example, to deliver the output "training materials", you would have "draft training materials"; "send training materials to technical committee for review"; "finalize training materials"; and "edit, design and print training materials".

Whether your organization works with outputs, benchmarks and outcomes or not, it does not change the overall picture. These are the products of your activities. In our soup example in chapter 3, "What are monitoring and evaluation?", cooking was the activity and checking while you were cooking was the monitoring. The product of the activity was the soup, which was also your output, and that makes people happy (or not), which would be the evaluation. Assessing whether outputs have been delivered or not is thus part of monitoring and process evaluation, and not of impact evaluation.

Planning your monitoring and evaluation

Key ideas

- To plan your monitoring, you will need to think "who", "when" and "how" as regards *(a)* keeping track of the participants and the quality of each activity, and *(b)* analysing the results and feeding them back into the project.
- To plan your evaluation, it is essential to identify your evaluation needs and resources and to decide what kind of evaluation you want.
- Following this, it is necessary to identify what information you will collect in order to determine whether you have achieved your objectives (indicators) and how you will collect and analyse that data.
- An evaluation plan would include the information above, plus an indication of who would be collecting and analysing the data, how, when and with what resources.

What we have seen so far is that to make monitoring and evaluation easier, it helps to first have clear objectives and plans of action. Now that you have these, you can turn to the task of actually planning your monitoring and evaluation.

Planning your monitoring

With regard to monitoring, things will be relatively straightforward. For each activity or group of activities, you will need to think who, when and how in relation to:

- Keeping track of who participates in the activities (number, age, gender).
- Keeping track of the quality of activities, including feedback of participants.
- Analysing the information at regular intervals.
- Feeding the results of that analysis back into the project at regular intervals.

We suggest that you go systematically through all your activities. Most of this information is not difficult to collect. In fact, at the planning stage, it is difficult to resist the temptation to list too much information. It may sound obvious, but if you do not use it, information is useless. Remember that you will need to collect it, analyse it and feed it back into the project regularly. Stick to the information that you and your staff can realistically collect, and try to identify the easiest way to do so. Moreover, the information must be of such a nature that you can analyse it and feed it back to the project regularly. In our experience, the most difficult part is often to analyse it regularly and use it. We would also suggest that you plan, at some point in your project, to sit down and "evaluate your monitoring". That is, sit down and think about how your monitoring is going, whether the information is being collected, analysed and used at all and what could be done to improve the process.

Planning your evaluation

As you can imagine, planning the evaluation of your project will be rather more elaborate, but by now, we hope, not an insurmountable obstacle. You have your objectives, so you know what achievements you need to demonstrate. Once again, divide the planning of your evaluation into a sequence of smaller decisions. We know that reality will be different, and that your decision-making process will probably be all connected. However, we hope that it will help clarify ideas if we divide things up a little.

Decide who will be involved in the decision-making process

You will need to decide who will be involved in the decision-making process. A small working group of representatives of staff, young volunteers, young participants and other stakeholders might be a good idea in order to ensure that the views of everyone are taken into account.

Decide what kind of evaluation you will undertake

The kind of evaluation you want to undertake will depend mostly on what you need your evaluation for and the resources you have available. If you go back to chapter 3, "What are monitoring and evaluation?", you will have a more detailed description of the possibilities available to you. In the meantime, here are a few examples:

- Maybe the project is implementing a model that has been extensively evaluated before. A process evaluation showing that your project has been faithful to the model may be enough.
- Maybe you want your project to become a model for others. Or you would like to show with certainty that the effects on your target group have been due to your project and not to other factors. If so, you will need an outcome evaluation with an experimental or quasi-experimental design and, therefore, an external evaluator to assist you and perhaps an external data-collection team.
- If your evaluation needs are "only" to learn how your project is working and how to improve it, the best choice would be a process evaluation (what happened?),

together with a simple outcome evaluation (what was its effect?). In this context, you would need baseline (pre-implementation) and post-implementation assessments. We would caution against having only a post-implementation assessment. On the basis of a post-implementation assessment only, you cannot effectively show that there has been a change.

- Maybe your donor requests an evaluation following a specific format and methodology, in which case some of these decisions will be made for you. However, you may still want to think if there are other needs of the project that can be met (other than keeping your donor happy).

Whatever your needs are and whatever it is you would like to do to meet them, you will need to balance them with the resources available. Time and money are needed to conduct an evaluation. Simple evaluations might not cost very much or require expert knowledge (and we hope that this handbook will provide enough information to enable simple evaluations to be undertaken). For more sophisticated evaluations, however, expert help may be needed—for example, from a local university. It might be useful to talk to people in other projects who have carried out evaluations. Ensure that there are sufficient resources: a thorough evaluation is not cheap—around 5 per cent of a project's budget may be needed for evaluation. The *All Stars Talent Show Network* in the United States of America contracted an external evaluation costing US$60,000. This seems like a lot of money until you discover that this is a big programme: their annual running costs are US$400,000; that is the evaluation represented 5 per cent of the budget for three years and the work had been going on for 19 years before the external evaluation was undertaken.

Develop your evaluation methodology

Once you have an idea of the purpose, type and resources of your evaluation, you are in a good position to develop your methodology. This may sound scary, and if you have decided to involve an external evaluator, this is definitely a good time for him or her to start helping you. However, it really does not need to be: essentially you just need to decide what information you will collect, how and from and about whom.

This is the stage where you identify what your indicators will be, as discussed in chapter 4, "What should be monitored and evaluated?". Basically, you will have a list of information that you want to collect for each objective, at least before and after implementation, so that you have an idea of whether there has been some change. For each of these pieces of information, you will need to identify how you will collect the information (methods) and who you will collect the information from or about (samples). Very often, you will not be able to collect the information you need from every single person in your target group. You will need to choose a part of it, or a "sample". In the next chapter, we will summarize what kind of methods and samples are available to you. In the meantime, here are a few general points to help you choose the right ones.

Firstly, remember that not all information has to be collected anew: some information may already exist. Or maybe during your needs assessment you have already gathered information that can serve as a baseline.

It is advisable to collect a few different indicators through different methods and from different sources and samples for each objective. The reasons for this are:

- If information is confirmed in different ways from different sources, at the end you will be able to compare the information and thus confirm your results. This process is called "triangulation".

- There is always the possibility that one of the methods of collecting information will not work. It is better to be able to count on more than one.

- You may need different kinds of information to satisfy different needs, either yours or those of important stakeholders. For example, a local authority may be willing to lend you support only if you can show that the programme or activity has a positive effect in terms of his or her own mission. Given that you will use your evaluation results for advocacy or fund-raising, maybe you can already start to think about which type of information will be more impressive to your future audience.

- Finally, different methods will produce different kinds of information, which can in turn be used for different purposes. Methods that generate quantitative data, that is, numbers, are good for presenting your project to advantage. Numbers impress. Methods that generate qualitative data are very helpful in understanding what has happened and why and thus are useful in suggesting how the project can improve. Some kinds of qualitative data, for example personal histories, can also be a powerful advocacy tool.

At the same time, it is important not to choose too many questions. There are many things that it would be interesting to know, but which do you really need to know? Remember that, to know these things, you will need to collect information and analyse it. Do you have the time? Do you have the resources? Are you trying to cover too much ground? Is there a resource you have not thought of before that could help you cover that extra idea?

Develop your evaluation plan

You have thought about your indicators, your methods and your samples. You can now develop your evaluation plan, that is, identify who will do what, when and with which resources. Ideally, therefore, you will go through each of the indicators, methods and samples and identify:

- Who will coordinate and be responsible for the collection and analysis of the information?
- Who will actually collect the data? How? When? With which resources?
- Who will analyse the data? How? When? With which resources?
- How will the information be used? When? With which resources?

Monitoring, evaluation and project implementation

Key ideas

- Make every effort to use the information collected through the baseline assessment and through monitoring. Although it can be used later, it is really meant to help you with implementation.
- Every now and then, review how the monitoring and evaluation are going. Be flexible, but try not to compromise the comparability of information.

After all this planning it is time to actually do something! From now on, it will hopefully be your plan that will guide you. Normally, before implementation starts, you will need to do some data collection for the baseline assessment. Once implementation starts, monitoring should also start.

Make a point of analysing the monitoring data and reporting on them regularly. It is true that if you collect data and do not use them during implementation, they can always be used at a later stage, during a process evaluation, for example. However, the purpose of monitoring is above all to help you with implementation and it provides a good opportunity for corrective action. It is difficult to advise how often “regularly” means, but common sense will help. It should be as often as possible, but with enough time between monitoring for the new information to be meaningful. Also, reporting does not need to be a “grand” affair: a discussion point in a weekly or monthly meeting or a chat with your staff and volunteers may be enough.

Do not forget the results from your baseline assessment! It is true that by the time you get the results from it you will have started your activities, it would be a good idea to set aside some time to review them to see whether any plans should be changed accordingly (especially evaluation plans) or whether the information gained can be used for further advocacy or fund-raising purposes.

Even if you have planned, and re-planned, and thought, and re-thought, about how you will collect and analyse your information, something is bound to go wrong. This was one of the reasons why we suggested that you collect different kinds of information. This is also one of the reasons why it is a good idea to review the monitoring process at regular intervals and consider how to take corrective action. The issue is to find a balance between being flexible and being too flexible. If the data collection or the analysis is not working, there is no point sticking to the plan for the sake of sticking to it. However, particularly with regard to evaluation information, there must be a certain consistency or you will not be able to compare information or draw any conclusion on the impact of your activities.

Evaluation

Key ideas

- Evaluation should have started with the baseline assessment. However, even if you did not have the time or the opportunity to undertake that assessment, a process of reflection on the achievements of a project is always possible and useful, especially if you have good information from monitoring.
- The process of both monitoring and evaluating can basically be divided into three main steps: collecting the data, analysing them and reporting and using the information. Analysing collected data does not happen by itself and can actually be resource-intensive. Collecting and analysing data is useless if the information thus generated is not reported and used.

By now, it should be clear that evaluation does not really start only after implementation, but that you will have already collected information during the baseline assessment. What if you have not done that assessment or collected information during implementation? Perhaps you did not think about evaluation at the planning stage. Very often there are limited time and resources to undertake evaluation. There may not be much opportunity to collect data and an evaluation may have to use what is available. Thus an actual evaluation may be far from "ideal". But most projects have a wealth of information readily available that can be used for evaluation. Maybe no one has thought to use it for evaluation purposes. This applies in particular to monitoring data.

For example, a manager may be keeping track of what is happening with a group of young people and may record this information: how many young people attend each session; how many boys and how many girls; what was on the programme each week; what the response was. The manager's purpose in collecting such information may be to monitor the project and to ensure that it is doing what it is expected to do. However, together with some data collection at the end of the project about how the lives of these young people have changed, and maybe some extra effort to find those who dropped out of the project, this information could already provide a good understanding of whether the project is being effective and why.

This is not to say that a baseline assessment is not necessary after all. A baseline assessment is much more effective in helping you build a more rigorous and complete picture of what your project has done; indeed, some donors require that you undertake one. However, it is important to remember, especially if you have collected good monitoring information, that a process of reflection on the achievements of a project is always possible and useful, even if you did not undertake a baseline assessment.

In general terms, you can divide the process of both monitoring and evaluating into three main steps: collecting the data, analysing them and reporting and using the information. We have decided to separate the phase of collecting data from that of analysis in order to draw attention to the fact that analysis is a phase that actually requires considerable resources and does not come automatically once the data have been collected.

Finally, collecting and analysing all this information is of little purpose unless it is used. This means reporting to workers, volunteers and donors and may include the children and young people who benefit from the project. Results will need to be presented in different forms appropriate to each audience—while the donors may want a full account of everything that was discovered, the project workers and volunteers will want the report to focus on what they have done well and what could be done better. The children and young people involved will probably want a simpler description of the work. We present some suggestions regarding these three phases in the next three sections.

Monitoring, evaluation and a new project cycle

Key ideas

- Monitoring and evaluation should lead to change and should be taken into account in the planning stage of new activities.

Evaluations are not of much use unless they lead to change. Having identified the lessons, how can they be applied in practice in this project or in others? There will be lessons for the evaluators as well. Using what has been learned can improve what happens next, both in projects and in their evaluations. We will not actually go into this stage in much detail, because this would lead into a new planning stage. However, no discussion about monitoring and evaluation would be complete without stressing that it is important that the circle be closed, using the monitoring and evaluation results to improve our activities.

Example of an organization that made key decisions on the project on the basis of the monitoring and evaluation results

The drug abuse prevention project decided that it would produce some publicity material on drugs for schoolchildren. The objective was to increase children's awareness of drugs and to facilitate child-adult conversations about drug issues. The activities planned/interventions were a poster campaign in schools, a leaflet for teenagers and a leaflet for parents.

In monitoring this work, the project kept track of the schools to which they had sent the posters—one of the administrative volunteers called the schools and checked that they had received the posters and were going to display them. She made sure that the volunteers who were asked to distribute the leaflets actually did so and she kept a list of where they had gone. She also checked that the leaflet for parents was available in the targeted schools.

Once the campaign had finished, it was time to evaluate it. Members of the project talked to children and teachers in some of the targeted schools. They found that a large proportion of the children had seen the leaflet and claimed to have read it, although when asked about the content, most were rather vague. Teachers in the schools were enthusiastic about the campaign and said that it had helped them discuss drug issues more easily. Project staff interviewed a few parents, not enough to be a "representative sample", but sufficient to get an idea of the effect of the campaign. Parents liked the leaflet, but had not used it to initiate conversations with their children.

The project members concluded that something more than a leaflet was needed to get parents and children talking. The evaluation had identified that parents felt able to talk with their children about drugs when the issue came up in a television programme (such as a "soap opera"). The project members started to plan the next stage of their work by thinking how they could use such "drug events" on television to encourage parent-child communication.

This example is invented, but is based on actual practice.