2. Why monitor and evaluate?

Key ideas

- Monitoring and evaluation provide feedback on our behaviour. They are something we do all the time, although it might not be a formal process (and we do not necessarily act on it).
- More formal and systematic monitoring and evaluation can give better feedback.
- Acting on the information from monitoring and evaluation is sometimes not easy, but it is worth it, because it means that we can improve our work and meet young people's needs more effectively.
- Results from monitoring and evaluating allow you to show the effectiveness of your project to your donors and stakeholders and thus secure more funding and collaboration.

Perhaps you are not very interested in monitoring and evaluation. Maybe it seems like an imposition and distant from your concerns. So let's start by showing how "monitoring" and "evaluation" (although we may not call them that) are things that we do as part of our everyday lives.

How do we know if what we do is effective? In our everyday life, we rely on feedback that results from our actions. A baby shakes a rattle and learns that by making certain movements with her hands, the rattle makes sounds that she finds pleasurable. Similarly, when she learns to crawl and to walk, she gets feedback from her body that teaches her what she can and cannot do in the physical world.

She also gets feedback from other people. As she learns to talk, adults praise her when she improves and correct her mistakes, and her ability to communicate increases. At school, her teacher gives her feedback through approval and disapproval and through marks for her schoolwork. In these ways—and many others—she learns to assess her own performance.

As she gets older, external assessment may become more formal. For example, if she decides to become a teacher, she must take examinations and undergo assessments of her learning and understanding before she is allowed to teach children. These formal assessments assure society that the work of professionals reaches a satisfactory standard. Once someone becomes a professional, they are also subject to monitoring to ensure that they maintain high standards. For example, teachers in many countries are monitored to make sure that the children are learning what they are supposed to learn.

In substance abuse prevention, there are few formal standards to be followed. So how do you know that what you are doing is any good? How can you ensure that the results you are achieving from your work match the intentions and objectives that you had when you started?

There is some resistance to monitoring and evaluation. Some people say that they do not need formal methods. They can judge for themselves whether or not things are going well. Yes, to some extent. Suppose you were running training courses for health workers to inform them about substance abuse. You could tell yourself that things were going well because the course participants attended, did not leave early and appeared to be enjoying the course. You could ask them what they thought of the course, and they would say that it was “great” and that they learned a lot.

This subjective feedback would be useful, but would it be sufficient? Probably not, because you would not know what they had actually learned and you would not know whether they had been able to put into practice what they had learned. It would also be easy for you to deceive yourself. The participants might seem to be learning and they might say to your face that they were learning (out of politeness—or fear), but if you asked them anonymously (for example, through a written, anonymous questionnaire or by using an independent evaluator), you might get different—and perhaps less positive—responses.

To know more, beyond your subjective views, you will need to collect information more formally and systematically. You will need to plan in advance how you will collect the information. You might want to go a step further and get someone external to evaluate your project for you. A participant in our meeting that discussed a draft of this handbook was talking about an external evaluation of her project and said: “These evaluators came in and they talked to kids—which is just what we do”. External evaluators might have more experience in evaluating than staff working in the project; they might have knowledge of evaluation techniques and tools.

But the main thing they have is that they are not part of your work—they are independent. This gives their evaluation objectivity and "distance", which makes it more authoritative. If you say your project is great—well you would, wouldn't you? If an outsider says it is great—then perhaps it really is!

Monitoring and evaluation require an appropriate attitude. A teacher will become a better teacher if she listens to the feedback she gets and acts on it. Some feedback may be uncomfortable for her—she will have to admit, "I didn't do that well". But if she can accept this temporary discomfort and use the feedback to improve her work, she will become better at doing what she does.

It's the same with our projects and activities. Monitoring and evaluation mean taking a critical look at what we are doing, asking difficult questions and being prepared to address problems. It's painful to accept that we did something badly, but only by facing up to "failures" (or let's call them "the times when we didn't achieve our objectives") can there be improvement. Sometimes the only way forward is to take a step back. This involves asking how things happened as they did, examining the values and methods of the project.

So monitoring and evaluation is a more formal and systematic way of doing what professionals do anyway. They reflect on what they have done and try to learn from it and do better next time. These subjective opinions and individual professional expertise can be combined with the more objective data obtained from formal monitoring and evaluation. It isn't that formal evaluation and monitoring is somehow "better" than individual opinions. It is another way of looking at things, a different kind of information. Using all the information appropriately gives a fuller account, a "richer picture", of what we are doing and its effects. The purpose is to improve what we do and make it more effective.

Monitoring allowed us to take corrective action

A good example was our monitoring of the implementation of the initial livelihood venture for youth (aged 18-24). This involved buying and selling clothes in the nearby market. Some of the youth requested a capital for this of 20,000 Philippine pesos (approximately 400 United States dollars). We asked them to make a simple business plan, open an account with the bank and set up a project management committee composed of three members (project chair, vice-chair and finance officer) to manage the venture. Upon completing all three, the funds were released. After a month, we conducted a feedback session with the project management committee and found that the finance officer had not followed what the group had agreed upon. Part of the funds had been released to three other individual members, who went into managing their own business. With this information, a consultative meeting with the youth group was called at which the finance officer was investigated. On her admission of guilt, she was asked to recover the funds from the three other individuals and was made to agree that she would be held liable to the group. Thus, with the feedback session and consultative meeting, we were able to get good information on the status of implementation of the project and were able to avert further misuse of the remaining funds of the group.

Addictus, the Philippines

Finally, another good reason to monitor and evaluate is that project funding may depend on it. Donors want evidence that money is being spent on work that gets results and sometimes evaluation might be a requirement of donors or potential donors. In addition, good evidence of success in your work is invaluable in gaining general support for what you are doing. Your work depends on support from other “stakeholders”—that is, both from people and organizations that might fund your work and people and organizations that are affected in some way by your work or whose support and involvement you need. Keeping these groups on your side is easier when you have evidence that what you are doing is having a positive impact.

3. What are monitoring and evaluation?

In this chapter, we will go through a perhaps boring, but very necessary task: defining our terminology. Virtually every agency, researcher and organization has its own definition of what monitoring is, what evaluation is, where to draw the line between the two and what the different kinds of evaluation are (the most common that you might have heard mentioned are process evaluation, outcome evaluation and cost evaluation). This section will look into these issues, proposing working definitions. Please note carefully: the definitions proposed below are those we have found helpful and use in our work. They are not, in any way, meant to be the way in which these terms are defined. Thus it is relatively more important that you familiarize yourself with the concepts, rather than with the actual terms, so as to be able to recognize them in the wild jungle of monitoring and evaluation terminology out there.

What is the difference?

Key ideas

- Monitoring means keeping track of what you are doing while you are doing it, so that you can take corrective action if necessary.
- Evaluation means finding out if you have achieved the effect on your target population that you said you would achieve, after you have finished implementing the activities.
- This distinction is not completely clear-cut, and a good evaluation will rely on good monitoring.

Think about cooking a meal. As you cook, you may check back with the cookbook to make sure you are following the recipe correctly and you will taste the food to see if it is cooked or if it needs some extra seasoning. You may also ask other people to taste it and give you their opinion. You do these things while you are cooking so that the meal is the best it can be. You are monitoring your cooking. Your monitoring can affect what the end result will be.

When you serve up your food to your family or friends, they'll be sure to comment and if it isn't very good, they will tell you so (unless they are very polite). They are evaluating your cooking. It is too late for the evaluation to have an effect on this meal, but it could improve your cooking in the future.

This analogy shows that monitoring looks at how your activity is being implemented while it is being implemented. It is something that is part of the activity: it goes on alongside it and contributes to its successful completion. Evaluation takes place at the end of the activity, when it is too late to have an effect on the final result, but it can be useful for future activities. Evaluation also assesses the effect of your activities: was your family happy with your meal? Has the situation of your target group changed as a result of your activities? See the box below for an example related to substance abuse prevention.

Monitoring and evaluation—the differences

The Highlife Project arranged interesting, exciting activities for local young people, in part to help them avoid drugs.

They monitored what they were doing by:

(a) *Having a brief staff/volunteers team meeting after each session to discuss what went well and what needed changing;*

(b) *Sometimes designating one team member to take on an observer role, when they were not too busy, and then discussing that feedback in the team meeting;*

(c) The team leader completing a short form, after each session, describing how many young people had been involved and what activities had taken place, and noting any other significant issues, especially issues raised by the team meeting;

(d) The team leader having regular managerial supervision sessions with her line manager at which any issues relating to the sessions could be raised and recorded.

There were monthly team meetings that included a discussion of the work. A detailed record ("minutes") of these meetings was made and the managers referred back to the minutes.

They evaluated what they were doing by:

(a) Asking the young participants to complete a questionnaire on whether they enjoyed the activities, what could be improved and some drug-related questions, such as how many close friends they had who regularly took drugs;

(b) Interviewing adults in the local community to ascertain any effects of the work on their community;

(c) Having a special team meeting at the end of each activity period to review what had happened and to compare the results with their objectives.

This distinction isn't entirely clear-cut for a number of reasons. Take process evaluation. Like monitoring, process evaluation looks at the things that have happened—the processes, how activities have been implemented. The difference between monitoring and process evaluation is that monitoring usually takes place while the activity is being undertaken, while process evaluation usually takes place at the end. In any case, a good evaluation is based on good monitoring. Evaluation looks at the effects of activities. However, to know why the effects of your project have been what they have been, you will still want to know what has happened during your activities and how they were implemented. If the effects were positive, this will also be useful in replicating the activities.

Different kinds of evaluation

Key ideas

- Process evaluation is about assessing what the project did and how it did it. It can be used to assess the fidelity of a project to its action plan. It is similar to monitoring, but takes place at the end of a project (like an evaluation).
- When we talk about evaluation (remember, this is only our working definition), what we really mean is outcome evaluation, evaluation that assesses the effects of a project.
- An outcome evaluation should normally include a component of process evaluation and a baseline assessment (which is not the same as a needs assessment).
- Cost evaluations are very difficult to do. However, a basic analysis of how much your programme cost is not too difficult and can be useful for advocacy.

Process evaluation

We have already mentioned process evaluation. Process evaluation describes what the project did and how it did it. It tries to find out if the project operated as intended. It doesn't try to measure outcomes, but looks at the fidelity of the programme in relation to its plan. In other words, process evaluation assesses whether a project did what it said it would do in terms of process.

Process evaluation is useful in taking stock of how a project went from the point of view of implementation. It is especially useful when you want to evaluate a project that replicates, in the same conditions, a project that has already been shown to be successful. If you followed the sequence of activities exactly, you can say, with a reasonable degree of certainty, that your project has been effective also. You can show that you followed the sequence of activities through a process evaluation. You should be careful, however. Even a tried and tested approach might not work in conditions different from the original ones. That is why an evaluation that looks at the effects of your project (or outcome evaluation, see below) is always useful.

Example of a process evaluation

The Drug Prevention Group decided that they would start a youth club, with the aim of keeping young people occupied with activities. They asked one member of their group to conduct a process evaluation. She looked at the minutes of the meeting in which the group had agreed to set up the club and saw that the plan was not only to provide typical youth-club activities, but also to have both formal and informal discussions about drugs with those attending. She observed the club activities and talked with young people and members of the group that organized the club. She couldn't find any evidence of drug-related discussions. In her report, she pointed out that the work of the club was not entirely in accordance with the plan.

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

An audit is a special kind of process evaluation. It is essentially a quality assurance process that checks actions and procedures against established guidelines and standards. This presupposes that such guidelines and standards exist. For instance, you might have heard of a financial audit. This verifies that an organization follows established procedures in their financial dealings and is usually performed by specially qualified professionals. However, an audit can concern any kind of activity/procedure. See the example below.

Example of an audit

We wanted to make sure that our project was meeting the donor's standards. We carried out an audit using their guidelines. We discovered that we were not doing enough to make our project a safe place to be: the donor's standards said that there had to be a staff member with first aid training on duty at all times, but we didn't have this. Thus we made sure that our staff received first aid training.

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

Outcome evaluation

Outcome evaluation tries to discover what the effect of the work has been on its intended targets. When we speak about evaluation, we are generally referring to outcome evaluation. If you go back to the examples about the differences between monitoring and evaluation, you might already see what we mean. Here's another example of an outcome evaluation. Innovative work that hasn't been done before will be in greater need of an outcome evaluation than work that is tried and tested. Assessing the effects of prevention activities is not easy for many reasons, and we will take a more in-depth look at these reasons and what to do about them in the next sections. The following example actually has an important strength and an important weakness. Can you spot them?

Example of an outcome evaluation

The Drug Prevention Group wanted to see if the work it had been doing had actually made a difference. Some members suggested asking the young people they had been working with what they thought about the service. Other members pointed out that more than opinions were needed; the issue was whether people were less likely to use drugs. Others said that the questions ought to be much broader than this: it wasn't just about not using drugs but about how the young people felt about themselves, whether their relationships with their family had improved, if they had improved their life chances through finding work, undertaking study and so on. Some outcomes would be "intended", others would be "unintended". Some of these unintended outcomes would be welcome; others might not be so positive. After some discussion, everyone agreed that measuring outcomes was not a simple matter.

They decided to use a variety of different measures from different sources. They would collect information from the young people, themselves, about their opinions of the service, also asking them about any effects on their lives. They would also interview the volunteers working in the programme and "significant others"—parents, guardians, teachers, employers—to collect their views of the effects of the programme on the young people. In addition, because they were interested in broader effects, they would ask local people how they had been affected by the service and they would also ask some of their local partners (churches, the community association and so on) what they thought the outcomes of the service had been.

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

In our opinion, the great thing about this example is the range of information that the group decided to collect from a range of sources. This will put them in a good position to understand what happened. However, they are missing a baseline assessment. The evaluation of the Drug Prevention Group is going to be rather weak without information on how the life of their target group was before they started to work with them. You need a starting point from which to measure progress towards the project's objectives. Without this it is difficult to answer the question "Has it made a difference?" A starting point is a baseline assessment. Such an assessment will tell you what the situation is, at or before the start of your work. Here's an example.

Example of a baseline assessment

Jadranka was setting up a new project to support young people in the local school through information and counselling. Her donors had set her some targets to achieve, for example, an increase in the students' awareness of the local substance abuse service. Before she started her work, she decided to measure the young people's awareness of the service, so she prepared a questionnaire and distributed it to a sample of the school's students. It also asked about some other things she was required to target, such as awareness of the effects of different kinds of substance. A year later, just before she wrote her annual report, she repeated the questionnaire survey and compared the results with her baseline assessment.

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

Sometimes a needs assessment is conducted before a project starts. A needs assessment is different from a baseline assessment, because it is an assessment of the situation in order to decide what to do. A needs assessment identifies what the problem is, what resources already exist and where the gaps are. It identifies what needs might or should be met by a project. It should always take into consideration the results of the monitoring and evaluation of previous projects. It might be that some of the information you collect for your needs assessment could be used as your baseline, for example, how many young people of which age are abusing substances, but this is not necessarily the case.

From all of this, something very important follows. As far as possible, you need to start to evaluate your project, that is, through a baseline assessment, before you start the implementation of your activities, not after. Let's say you have decided what your project will do (your activities) and what its aim or purpose would be [your objective(s)]. Ideally, you will have decided this on the basis of a needs assessment. We certainly recommend that you do.* Then, before you begin implementation, you will need to collect the information that will become the baseline against which you will assess whether you have achieved what you wanted to achieve. Most probably you will find that you already have some of this information from the needs assessment, but that you need to collect some more to have a proper baseline. You begin implementation only after you have collected this information. We are aware that this might not always be possible and that, in fact, you might be reading these lines while in the middle of implementation and wondering "Does this mean I cannot evaluate my activities at all?" No, it does not mean this. We discuss some other possibilities in chapter 6, section D, Evaluation.

However, you should be aware of another important point. An evaluation including a baseline assessment will only tell you that there has been a change in the situation of your target group. To be able to say that this change has been due to your project, you will need to

*See United Nations, Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, *A Participatory Handbook for Youth Drug Abuse Prevention Programmes: a Guide for Development and Improvement* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.02.XI.10) (http://www.unodc.org/youthnet/pdf/ handbook.pdf); World Health Organization, *Primary Prevention of Substance Abuse: a Workbook for Project Operators* (http://www.unodc.org/youthnet/global_initiative/pdf/initiative_activities_workbook.pdf); and World Health Organization, *Primary Prevention of Substance Abuse: a Facilitator Guide* (http://www.unodc.org/ youthnet/global_initiative/pdf/iniative_activities_facilitator_guide.pdf).

undertake more complex kinds of outcome evaluation, as we explain in the box below. Unless you are a trained researcher in social sciences, we do not recommend that you undertake such an evaluation on your own: you should enlist the assistance of an experienced evaluator. We will discuss this issue more in depth in the following chapter. We will also discuss how, even if you cannot undertake this kind of evaluation, you can still undertake a meaningful self-evaluation. For the moment, it is only important that you know that these possibilities exist.

Control groups and quasi-experimental and experimental designs

Even if you can compare the results of your post-implementation assessment with the results of your "pre-implementation assessment" (another name for a baseline assessment), you cannot state that the (hopefully) positive impact on your target group has been due to your project. This change might have been caused by something else that happened in the meantime. This "something else" is called an "intervening variable". If you want to show that change is due to your project, you need to work with two target groups that are as similar as possible to each other. One group takes part in your project and the other doesn't. This group that does not benefit from your project, but is similar to your target group, is called a "control group". You compare the results of pre- and post-evaluation assessments of your target group with those of pre- and post-evaluation assessments of the control group. The idea is that if the control group does not show any change and the target group does, you can confidently state that the change is due to your project. This way of doing an outcome evaluation with pre- and post-implementation assessments on both a target and a control group is called a "quasi-experimental design". It is quasi-experimental, because you cannot be certain that the groups are similar in all relevant characteristics. Therefore, you cannot be completely certain that there is not something in the way you chose the groups that has caused the impact, rather than your project. To avoid this possible bias, you would need an "experimental design" in which a representative sample is assigned at random to either the target or the control group.

Cost evaluation

Cost evaluation (sometimes called "cost-benefit analysis") attempts to identify the costs and benefits of a programme and compare it with the alternatives. It isn't enough for a programme to be cheap if it is ineffective; and it isn't enough for a programme to be effective if it is more expensive than a similarly effective alternative. Cost evaluation is not easy, because you need to have good information about the costs and the effects of your project and of other projects as well. These other projects should be similar enough in their objectives and targets to warrant a comparison. Moreover, it's difficult to measure all the costs and benefits of a programme—many of the costs may be hidden, many of the benefits may not be obvious, some benefits may be different from what you would expect. Finally, information on the costs and benefits of other programmes might not be that easy to obtain. However, for advocacy purposes, it might be useful, from time to time, to calculate how much your activities have cost and divide this by the number of people you have reached. This is not a "real" cost evaluation, but you might be able to show how "little" achieving your objectives cost and this might be useful for advocacy purposes.

Example of a cost evaluation

The Substance Abuse Prevention Group's youth club was quite cheap to run. It was staffed by volunteers and financed by street collections and fund-raising events. But was it good value for money? After all, there were other ways the group could have spent its money. The group decided to check this and asked a colleague to quantify the costs and benefits of the service. The colleague looked at the running costs of the club and compared them with relevant alternatives (an outreach project and a mentoring scheme). He reported that the costs of the youth club were comparatively low for the number of young people involved and that, in addition to direct support for these young people, it was a good way to recruit new volunteers. The club also had the support of the local community and had created a positive profile for the Substance Abuse Prevention Group. Whether the club was effective in its objectives was another matter; to discover this would take a more comprehensive investigation.

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