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Who should be involved in the monitoring and evaluation?

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Key ideas

- Involving does not mean “collecting information from”; it means participating in taking decisions about and implementing the evaluation.
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Another aspect of monitoring and evaluation is deciding who will be involved and how. By “involving”, we do not mean “collecting information from”, but participating in the decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation process of an activity (and you could monitor and evaluate your monitoring and evaluation, too). Therefore, what you need to think about is who will participate in taking decisions about and actually undertaking the monitoring and evaluation. Should the staff and young volunteers of your organization be involved? What about an external evaluator and other stakeholders in the community? This section will try to answer these questions.

Involving staff

Key ideas

- Involving staff in monitoring and evaluation is part of establishing a culture of participation, reflection and improvement in your organization.
- It is essential to support staff in their efforts to monitor and evaluate through training and supervision.

Monitoring and evaluation should not be remote from the everyday concerns of projects; in some form or another, they are part of our work. It helps to think of monitoring and evaluation as one end of a spectrum of activities. At one end of the spectrum, people simply follow orders, at the other end, they examine what they do and use their increasing understanding to develop their professional practice. To help staff to do this, organizations should establish what might be called a “culture of reflection”.

Developing such a culture may not be easy. In many projects, there is a “culture of doing”. This is admirable: people work hard to get things done. But sometimes “doing” can be a substitute for “reflection”, “pausing for thought”, “considering” and other activities that sometimes seem less important. And “doing” is not always the best use of one’s time. For example:

- Maybe “wrong” or ineffective or counter-productive things are being done.
- Maybe the things being done were once the “right” things, but are now no longer appropriate.
- Maybe the things being done are fairly effective, but doing some different things would bring even better results.
- Maybe all the “doing” is preventing the young people from taking more responsibility and control for themselves.

Monitoring and evaluation are steps on the road to establishing a “culture of reflection” because they imply:

- Defining clear objectives and plans for the work.
- Being open to the work being assessed against those objectives and plans.
- Being prepared to alter what is done if evaluation shows that the objectives are not being met.

Such a culture of reflection cannot be imposed on staff: they must be involved in the process of creating it. Some workers may get upset if they are told that what they have been doing is not as good as they imagined it to be. For example, those who have been with the organization for a long time may feel uncomfortable about close scrutiny of their work. People who just want to “do good” may not welcome a more rigorous look at what they are achieving. These worries are legitimate and need to be addressed; establishing a culture of reflection needs to be approached sensitively. Here’s an example.

Helping staff to reflect on what they do

Sonal had taken over the management of a substance abuse prevention team that included three workers, who had all been there for a long time, and a team of dedicated volunteers. There were the inevitable suspicions of what a new manager might do, which increased when Sonal explained that she wanted to review the team's activities and see whether they were getting results.

Sonal realized that she needed to gain the confidence and cooperation of the team and volunteers, so she arranged a special meeting where they were asked to think about the objectives of their work. After some initial resistance, they had an enjoyable brainstorming session and then prioritized their list of objectives. They discussed each of the main objectives and related them to the actual work they were doing or had planned.

Sonal then asked the group to discuss how they knew if what they were doing made a difference. This led to much discussion: some thought it was self-evident. One person said: "If we tell them about the dangers of substances, then they won't use them". Others questioned this glib view and the group's conclusion was that they really did not know how effective they were in communicating substance abuse prevention messages. Several of the group felt that what they were doing was well designed and conformed to the research evidence, but they admitted that they could not be sure it was making a difference. Some of them said that it was impossible to determine and that you just had to keep "hitting home the message". But once the doubts had been raised, others could see the problem, and the more open-minded participants were prepared to consider solutions. They went on to discuss what could be done to gather more information about the effects of their work.

Sonal felt that the meeting had been a useful start to the process of helping people recognize the need for monitoring and evaluation and to address the practical issues involved in getting those data. She was pleased that the discussions had allayed most people's fears about doing this.

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

Involving young volunteers and participants

Key ideas

- Young people who participate in prevention programmes can also be involved in monitoring and evaluating the changes among their own peer or target group.
- When young people are involved, it is very important that they understand why they are involved and know what their roles are.

Young people who participate in prevention programmes should also be involved in monitoring and evaluating the changes among their group. This can become part of their personal review process. Here's what Sonal did next.

Involving young volunteers

A second key issue that Sonal wanted to address in her new managerial role was the lack of real youth participation in the work of the substance abuse prevention team. Although young people were involved as volunteers, they did not have any say in the policy of the organization and their knowledge was not used to plan programmes or to gain feedback.

Sonal made a good start by organizing a meeting of the young volunteers. She made it welcoming, with some food and drink, and they began with some "ice-breaker" activities. She had prepared for the meeting by planning it with a small group of young people. They then ran the meeting, chairing it and taking minutes. The volunteers very much welcomed this, feeling for the first time that they really mattered to the organization.

As the meeting progressed, interesting information emerged about local substance abuse issues that the team was not currently addressing and there were some good suggestions about how these might be tackled. Sonal explained that she wanted to ensure that what the substance abuse prevention team did was worthwhile, and this meant that it needed to be monitored and evaluated. The young people were eager to help with this and brainstormed about ways in which this might be done. They came up with some good suggestions, including arranging focus groups and puppet-assisted interviews with younger children to find out about their knowledge of and concerns about substances.

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

As with everything regarding monitoring and evaluation, the involvement of young volunteers and participants does not happen of its own accord. It is not rocket science, but there are a few things that you need to keep in mind to ensure that young people are kept involved in a meaningful way:

- Make meetings easy for people who are not used to formal meetings by using appropriate techniques (some activities, not all talk).
- Value the contribution of volunteers and participants, that is, act on it and give feedback to them on what action was taken on the basis of their contribution and why.
- Have some of the young volunteers and participants run at least part of the monitoring and evaluation activities.
- Provide supervision and training to young volunteers and participants that you involve in monitoring and evaluation: no one is born an evaluator, and appropriate support will ensure that their efforts and input do not go to waste.

Training and supervision are important

Young people were involved in analysis of the data from the pre- and post-implementation tests. The problem was that the data were collected but not well presented, and some important information and details were not included in the report. Next time we will continue the idea of involving young people in the analysis of data, but prior to their involvement we will have an orientation session on how to do it. Close supervision by the project staff is also recommended in order to answer the questions of the young people during the data collection and analysis.

Foundation for Adolescent Development, the Philippines

Involving other stakeholders

Key ideas

- It is good practice to involve the main project stakeholders in monitoring and evaluation: their perspective and/or resources could help.
- You may not want to involve everyone at all stages, but representatives of key stakeholders could be involved in the decision-making process and the larger community might be informed of the progress at key stages.

“Good practice” in participatory project implementation and in substance abuse prevention promotes the involvement of a wide range of community stakeholders in the development and implementation of prevention projects. It should come as no surprise that it is recommended that they should also be involved at the monitoring and evaluation stages.

Firstly, each person will bring his or her own perspective and help to build a fuller picture of what is happening. Secondly, the fact that there has been an evaluation or the evaluation results, themselves, should not come as a surprise to stakeholders. Moreover, the fact that stakeholders at least know what kind of monitoring and evaluation is in place might contribute to reassuring them as to the value of the project and to increasing their commitment. Some of them (especially donors) may have needs that have to be taken into account. Moreover, some of them may be in a position to provide human or technical resources for your monitoring and evaluation activities or may be in a position to put you in contact with such resources.

It might not be practical (see our example below) or even advisable, to involve all stakeholders at all stages of monitoring and evaluation. If you do not have one for your project already, you may want to create a committee with representatives of key stakeholders who would be involved at key stages of the process. The larger community could be kept informed through a few meetings (for example, concerning the process, the baseline results and the final results).

Each group should have its space

To maximize time and money, different groups (including youth beneficiaries, youth organizers, support groups such as church groups, community leaders and so on) were gathered together in the same venue to evaluate the project. This resulted in a misguided flow of discussions, as different concerns were heard and were not addressed according to priority and importance in the project. The young beneficiaries were overwhelmed by the adult participants. Through the experience, it was realized that each group should have their own separate discussions so as to become more focused and effective in addressing different concerns.

Foundation for Drug Information Campaign, the Philippines

Involving an external evaluator

Key ideas

- An external evaluator lends objectivity to the findings of an evaluation and can look at a project with trained and independent eyes.
- However, an external evaluator can be costly and there still needs to be intensive follow-up to ensure that he or she has a good grasp of the situation and chooses data collection and reporting methods that meet the needs of the organization.
- An external evaluator can certainly contribute to but does not guarantee a successful evaluation.

Depending on the kind of evaluation and methods you intend to use, it might be a good idea to involve an external evaluator. An external evaluator has many advantages. The first is that he or she will have skills in conducting evaluations that you and your team may not have. The second is that, being external to the project, the evaluator will be able to look at the project with fresh eyes without being “influenced” by personal issues or by personal “investment” in parts of the project. Thirdly, as mentioned above, the results of an evaluation overseen by an external evaluator will be perceived as being more objective and will therefore have more authority when they are disseminated.

However, involving an external evaluator also has its disadvantages. Firstly, it can be very costly, especially for a small programme. Secondly, an evaluator will have his or her own point of view on what needs to be done, and this may not always coincide with the needs of the project. One way to lower the costs of involving an external evaluator is to involve a local university, giving it the opportunity to do field work. In that case, however, it will be more

important than ever to maintain a close dialogue in order to harmonize the needs of the organization with the research needs of the university. Thirdly, it may be difficult for an external evaluator to get to know and thus understand the project and its people as well as someone who has worked with it.

Should you involve an external evaluator? There is no right or wrong answer to this question. You may feel that your programme has become big enough and established enough that it is time to make this investment. Alternatively, you may think that your resources are too scarce and that it would be enough for your programme itself to coordinate a smaller-scale evaluation with the staff and volunteers. Both would be very reasonable points of view, depending on the circumstances. Here are a few issues to keep in mind before you take your decision.

The fact that you cannot afford an external evaluator does not mean that you have to abandon the idea of doing an evaluation altogether. Systematic monitoring and self-evaluation can go a very long way in telling you how your programme is progressing and can suggest ways to improve. In fact, some might argue, it is the best way to go about it. Moreover, a systematic and well-presented self-evaluation can also be an effective fund-raising and advocacy tool, especially for a relatively small group, which few would expect to have the resources to undertake a larger-scale evaluation. You can do a lot without an evaluator.

Conversely, the fact that you have employed an external evaluator does not necessarily mean that impact can be attributed to your project with any degree of certainty. To obtain this, you would need a more complex kind of evaluation that would include, for example, an experimental or quasi-experimental design (see the box in chapter 3, section B, under Outcome evaluation). Admittedly, to undertake a study of this kind, you will most probably need to hire an external evaluator, unless you are an evaluator yourself. However, a pre- and post-implementation comparison undertaken by an external evaluator will look more authoritative, but will not necessarily be more informative, than pre- and post-implementation assessments undertaken by the project team.

If you decide to invest in an external evaluator, it is very important that the organization not “hand over” the evaluation entirely to him or her. Although the evaluator must remain independent and will need to follow principles of scientific rigour, the evaluation should first of all serve the purposes of the organization. You should be able to make sense of the work undertaken. You should be able to use the results of the evaluation, to learn from it and, if everything goes well, to present your work to the outside world in a clear and informative way. This means that the organization should always maintain a dialogue with the evaluator and insist that choices concerning indicators, data collection methods, samples, analysis and reports be discussed and decided upon jointly.

