The Roles of Monitoring and Evaluation in Projects

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Abstract
Many projects in third world countries fail to be successfully completed due to several reasons. Among these are lack of understanding of the need for monitoring and evaluation. This paper attempts to outline the importance of these two and how they can be applied to ensure successful completion of projects. The paper also sets out the common constraints that impede these two and outlines ways in which these can be overcome.
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Many third world countries have numerous projects in an attempt to improve their infrastructure and this improves the standard of living of its citizens. Huge sums of money are put into this activity and it is important to get value for money. Two aspects that would contribute towards ensuring these are monitoring and evaluation. Unfortunately, many project owners and managers do not recognize the need and usefulness of these two. This paper sets out the roles of both monitoring and evaluation in successful implementation of projects and how these can be applied. It highlights the common constraints and ways in which these constraints can be overcome.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions of Project Monitoring and Evaluation

Although monitoring and evaluation are viewed as related, they are distinct functions. Monitoring is viewed as a process that provides information and ensures the use of such information by management to assess project effects – both intentional and unintentional – and their impact. It aims at determining whether or not the intended objectives have been met. Evaluation draws on the data and information generated by the monitoring system as a way of analyzing the trends in effects and impact of the project. In some cases, it should be noted that monitoring data might reveal significant departure from the project expectations, which may warrant the undertaking of an evaluation to examine the assumptions and premises on which the project design is based.

2.2 Project Design Concepts

In an attempt to address this, it is necessary to have a common understanding of project design concepts upon which to build an understanding of project monitoring and evaluation. Projects are an attempt, using specific inputs, to create a better situation for the beneficiaries. It should also be emphasized that projects are designed based on a linked set of hypotheses and assumptions and that, therefore, they are by nature somewhat "risky" ventures in that their particular approach may not have been tried before. Turning to project design process – to emphasise the links between the different levels of the project design. One needs to take a quick "test" to ensure that the concepts of project inputs, outputs, effects, and impact are shared by all. Based on this identification of four levels in a project, project monitoring can be defined as the process of gathering information to compare the actual use of project inputs and completed outputs with the planned use of inputs and completed outputs. Project evaluation can be defined as the process of gathering information to assess the effects and impact of a project.

2.3 Role of Monitoring

In defining the term monitoring, one needs to be exposed to a number of concepts associated therewith. Monitoring is the continuous assessment of a programme or project in relation to the agreed implementation schedule. It is also a good management tool which should, if used properly, provide continuous feedback on the project implementation as well assist in the identification of potential successes and constraints to facilitate timely decisions. Unfortunately, in many projects, the role of this is barely understood and therefore negatively impacts on the projects. Monitoring is not only concerned with the transformation of inputs into outputs, but can also take the following forms:

2.3.1 Physical and financial monitoring

Measuring progress of project or programme activities against established schedules and indicators of success.

Process monitoring: Identifying factors accounting for progress of activities or success of output production.

Impact monitoring: Measuring the initial responses and reactions to project activities and their immediate short-term effects. Projects are monitored so as to:

- Assess the stakeholders' understanding of the project;
- Minimise the risk of project failure;
- Promote systematic and professional management; and
- Assess progress in implementation.

One needs to recognize the role played by the various stakeholders in monitoring. These players include the financiers, implementing agencies, project teams, interested groups such as churches, environmentalists, etc. It should further be recognized that, to be an effective management tool, monitoring should be regular but should take into account the risks inherent in the project/programme and its implementation. In many developing countries, one tends to find the following aspects in monitoring and evaluation of projects:

- There is a dominant use of external consultants in monitoring and evaluation.
- There is a dominant use of donor procedures and guidelines in monitoring.
- Sustainability is often not taken into account.
- Monitoring is sometimes used to justify past actions.
- Concerns of stakeholders are not normally included.
- Lessons learned are not incorporated.

If one looks at these, it is clear that there is need to revisit these for sustainability. For example, over reliance on external consultants and donor may impact negatively on sustainability – an important aspect of any project.

2.3.2 Decision-making in monitoring and design of project monitoring system

The purpose of this is to provide a conceptual framework that may be used in designing a project monitoring system. For a start, one needs to re-identify the purposes of a project monitoring system. It should be emphasized that, whereas a project monitoring system is a process of comparing actual use of inputs and completed outputs with planned use of inputs and planned completed outputs, the purpose of a project monitoring system is to provide information to stakeholders that can be used to make decisions during the implementation of the project. Then, through brainstorming, groups can identify the possible stakeholders in a project. Among these could be the beneficiaries, the project management staff, regional and national ministry officials, and the donors / financiers. Once this is done, it is important that a clear plan of how to accomplish monitoring while ensuring maximum benefits is put in place.

2.3.3 What are the characteristics of an excellent monitoring system?

Each project is unique. It is therefore suggested that prior to starting of a project, a discussion should ensure to try and identify these. Among them could be: simple, quickly provides information for corrective action, cost-effective, flexible, accurate, comprehensive, relevant, accessible, leads to learning, transparent, and shares information up and down.

2.3.4 Tools for Monitoring

One of the greatest weaknesses of management information is the lack of effective and timely communication of information to the users. Some monitoring staff often invest too much time and resources in gathering data which they frequently fail to interpret and present in a form that will convey the meaning of the progress made. This should be avoided if possible. Appropriate monitoring tools should be put in place and used accordingly. The importance of communication in project management is equally critical. It is the "oil" that lubricates the project movement in the attainment of the stated objectives. Some of the most widely used tools for project monitoring, and their limitations include the following:

Verbal communication: This is probably the most effective mode of communication. Among its advantages is that it is quick, and its presentation can be adapted to concerns and questions of the audience. However, this type of tool to communicate monitoring information can lead to misunderstandings and sometimes denial of information.

Meetings: The very nature of project / programme management makes it inevitable that certain meetings are convened to communicate and share project information. Other programmes may even require standing committees where outsiders may be invited to review programme performance. One needs to be cautioned that, while it is important to have meetings, they should be used as effective tools. Meetings can be used for sharing and interchanging information, clarifying, stimulating, and seeking the best solutions regarding project performance.

Reports: The importance of monitoring reports should not be overlooked. It should be noted that these are an essential part of project / programme monitoring. Activities undertaken, inputs supplied, money disbursed, etc. have to be recorded and accounted for. However, reports are only effective if they are submitted to the right people at the right time to facilitate corrective decision making.

Diary notes: While most people do not use this mode of recording information, it remains an important option. It is essential to record key decisions, which may have been made at formal or informal meetings. Its format should be simple – giving the date, time, place and the names of the people present when the decision was taken. However, experience from many countries (developing) indicate that some of the problems in general would include:

- Most reports gather dust in offices without being effectively used.
- Sometimes the wrong information is collected, which may not be useful in decision-making.
- Some departments or units do not have the necessary logistics – e.g. paper, typewriters, etc. – to write reports.
- There has normally been no feedback on the reports presented to higher authorities.

All the above need to be actioned upon to ensure those maximum benefits of this are attained.

2.3.5 Preparation of monitoring reports

The purpose of a project monitoring report is to provide information to assist stakeholders in comparing performance against plans so that current or potential problems can be identified and analyzed. The uses of project monitoring reports are to:

- Document completion of project activities;
- Identify significant deviations from plans;
- Reveal problems to appropriate stakeholders;
- Assist in corrective decision-making;
- Monitor implementation of corrective actions;
- Identify shortcomings of existing management and monitoring systems;
- Provide information for coordination of national development programmes;
- Provide reference material for planning of subsequent projects; and
- Provide information for future evaluators.

2.3.6 Potential limitations of project monitoring report

Some of these include:

- They tend to focus on a pre-determined set of data for information.
- The attitude of the persons doing the reporting may cause them to hide problems.
- They may emphasize problems rather than opportunities.
- They may not be shared with those who provided the data.
- The information may be too subjective.

On the other hand, some advantages of good project monitoring reports are:

- They provide the regularized flow of information needed for decision-making.
- They provide a history of the project which can be the basis for lessons learned and evaluation of the project.
- They assist in fostering discipline among stakeholders.
- They may give sense of responsibility to the target group.
- They can be used to identify skill building needs of those responsible for collecting data and preparing the reports.

3.0 EVALUATION

Definition of evaluation: Evaluation can be defined as a process which determines as systematically and as objectively as possible the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact of activities in the light of a project / programme performance, focusing on the analysis of the progress made towards the achievement of the stated objectives. In most cases, evaluation is not given emphasis in projects, as what is normally considered is monitoring.

Purpose of Evaluation: Evaluation has several purposes, which include the following:

- It assists to determine the degree of achievement of the objectives.
- It determines and identifies the problems associated with programme planning and implementation.
- It generates data that allows for cumulative learning which, in turn, contributes to better designed programmes, improved management and a better assessment of their impact. The key words in this scenario are "lessons learned".
- It assists in the reformulation of objectives, policies, and strategies in projects / programmes.

- It should also be noted that in some cases, evaluation has been used to resolve non-programme issues affecting different donors.

For instance, two organizations involved in separate but similar programmes on land management may undertake an evaluation of the entire programme to assess the extent to which they can cooperate. Consequently, evaluation can be seen as a process that determines the viability of programmes / projects and facilitates decisions on further resource commitment.

3.1 Usage and limitations of the various types of evaluation,
These include:

- *Interim evaluation:* This normally takes place at some point during the life of a programme, usually mid-term.
- *Terminal evaluation***:** This assesses the progress made towards the achievement of the pre-determined objectives *at* the end of the programme and provides a basis for decisions on future action. Its findings and recommendations are often used to decide whether or not to stop the project or when a new phase is under consideration.
- *Ex-post evaluation:* This is conducted after a sufficient number of years (depending on the project) have elapsed since project completion so as to measure the impact.

It is generally accepted that, if the evaluations are to be objective, they have to be undertaken by external consultants. However, there is a general feeling that at times external consultants are overused. They recommended that external consultants should work in a conductive environment to facilitate the transfer of knowledge to their counterparts. Governments should take the lead in promoting this aspect.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS
Monitoring and evaluation when carried out correctly and at the right time and place are two of the most important aspects of ensuring the success of many projects. Unfortunately, these two although known to many project developers tend to be given little priority and as a result they are done simply for the sake of fulfilling the requirements of most funding agencies without the intention of using them as a mechanism of ensuring the success of the projects. It should also be noted that each project may have unique requirements for this and that in such circumstances, project managers and developers should attempt to develop suitable monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. It is recommended that further education be given too many project manager sin aspects of monitoring and evaluation so as to encourage them to use these tools often and correctly.

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