Multi-country and multi-agency PM&E systems

In this short article I reflect on some of the main challenges and lessons learned from setting up a multi-country and multi-agency PM&E system based on work I am carrying out in a team with other consultants to develop, implement and support a Programme Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E) system that functions for very different kinds of projects (all funded by the same donor) and very different implementing agencies (from NGOs to national and international development agencies and organisations).

Some of the main challenges encountered:
Setting up the PM&E system created multiple challenges for the development of the system.

First, the funding instrument was set up as an emergency trust fund, which meant that good MEL practice was not followed: establishing the theory of change, intervention logic and clear goals established prior to programme start.

Second, many of the projects had already begun implementation when the donor asked us to establish the M&E framework and results matrix for the entire programme. The implementing agencies were understandably reluctant to align their project-level intervention logic with the programme level objectives, add new indicators, and collect additional data for them (needed to aggregate data across the different projects).

Third, very diverse PM&E knowledge within the different implementing partners makes it necessary to create different sorts of support tools and measures which is obviously challenging with the given resource constraints.

There were also challenges with how different organizations use **terminology** and with **communication** more broadly:

- Different organisations use different PM&E terminologies and different hierarchy levels. We encountered little willingness (especially in big organisations) to adapt their systems to our system as they had already their own systems in place. In addition, technically it is not always easy (and it can be costly) to make adaptations to suit additional requirements during the course of the action.
- Reconstruction of the intervention logic when policy and strategic documents do not follow a red line as well as many different stakeholders with different vested interests where buzzwords seem more important than logic and coherence.
- A lack of a clear communication plan concerning the main stakeholders leads to uncertainty about who

communicates what information/data when to whom, who has to approve what/when, etc. causing considerable (many of them avoidable) delays.

Last, **technology-related challenges**:
A monitoring tool (which is more a tool to showcase projects than a real monitoring tool that can help with project steering) was commissioned to another company. Therefore, IPs not only need to align with our system, but also with an additional tool. And, obviously, also our system needs to be compatible with the third system.

Lessons learned

I'd like to share some of the main lessons learned/recommendations from the challenges with setting up a PM&E system for multiple agencies working in many different sectors and countries:

Involve the PM&E support team (whether this be internal or external) before the beginning of the project ideally involving them in budget discussions. This can greatly help with a good estimation of time and staff resources needed prior, during and after set up of the system or more broadly support needed during the conception and inception phase and later for data collection and reporting. The experts should be able to estimate more realistically the resource need of different M&E support and tools. To do this, it is helpful to know the type of organisations and their PM&E capacity the PM&E team will be going to work with. Some organisations really need a lot of support, e.g. with the construction of their theory of change or the development of SMART indicators.

A monitoring tool for such a variety of projects needs to be flexible and somehow generic enough to fit various types of project complexity and very different types of project fields, in our case spanning from socio-economic reinsertion of migrants, legal counselling to governments regarding human rights, from support to victims of trafficking, etc.

Make a clear communication plan who should communicate what, when, in which format, to whom considering time for revision, quality assurance and approval.

Plan sufficient time for coordination with stakeholders.

Obviously, ideally you shall start the set up of the PM&E system BEFORE projects are contracted and implementing agencies start implementing. From our experience in the conceptual phase IPs are more willing to adapt their documents of action and logframes to the higher-level system than after contracting. The type and time of support organisations can expect shall also be made clear from the beginning.

As a commissioner make clear what you want the monitoring data to tell you. Be clear about what you need the monitoring data for. Which data are you REALLY going to use? This is good practice in order to avoid a waste or misuse of resources.

Face-to-face meetings can considerably facilitate processes that seem to stall online.

Be pragmatic and flexible (while keeping as much as possible high standards) on what you can realistically expect. This concerns all stakeholders involved.

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