

Streamlining Monitoring and Evaluation Information Gathering Systems

Tracking Progress Across Sulawesi



The Central Sulawesi Province is one of the poorest provinces in Indonesia. Its many villages are scattered across isolated areas in the hilly highlands. The Rural Empowerment and Agricultural Development Programme (READ) set out to foster sustainable economic growth and improve natural resource management in 150 target villages in five districts of Central Sulawesi Province. The overarching goal of the programme is to strengthen the capacity of local communities, particularly the rural poor, so that they can better plan and manage the development of their livelihood capacity. The READ Programme works on four core areas of intervention: (1) community empowerment; (2) on-farm and off-farm enterprise development; (3)

rural infrastructure development and (4) programme management and policy analysis. The lead partners are the national government and relevant line ministries (e.g., the Ministry of Agriculture), the provincial and local government, provincial and local-level offices of ministries. Also, civil society, the private sector or academic institutions are engaged to provide expert services.

It is a substantial challenge to measure the activities being implemented at any given moment, the challenges and accomplishments of each action, as well as the broader impact of the combined efforts across the 150 villages. The READ programme management is implementing the Results-Based Management (RBM) approach to address these challenges.

Why revise the M&E information system

The IFAD Mid-term Review (MTR) Mission, conducted in October 2011, identified weaknesses in many of the programme's Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and knowledge management approaches—especially in M&E and financial management. The recommendation was to initiate a comprehensive overhaul of the M&E system in order to meet the set targets for the subsequent programme phase (2012–2014).

Areas for improvement (identified during the MTR Mission)

- Data and indicators were not collected from field officers in a comprehensive way.
- Different forms were used to collect the same indicators, which meant that indicators could not be compiled and compared to yield a programme-wide analysis.
- Weak competence in executing M&E responsibilities.
- The robust M&E instrument and software applications were seen as too complex. Also, the instructions and operational guidelines were not clearly defined, which resulted in frequent delays in the flow of information.

During the first half of 2012, the M&E system was reexamined and redesigned and, since September 2012, it has been implemented across the programme. The main driving rationale behind the changes was to simplify the format and to assure that indicators can be easily and quickly gathered and analysed.

The READ software: technical specifications

The READ Programme Monitoring and Evaluation Information System is a software application that can be used in a network or stand alone. It is designed for the Windows operating system and Library Visual Foxpro 7.0. The data input form, which contains columns for actions, outputs, outcomes and impact indicator per activity—can be saved as a DBF file. The software application is compatible with the annual work plan and budget (AWPB) templates (used by IDAF) and the Rencana Kerja dan Anggaran Kementerian dan Lembaga or RKAKL (the equivalent used by the Indonesian government), which makes it possible to access and modify the same DBF file from each network.

Steps in developing the M&E information system

1. **Review of existing methodology.** The management team and the contracted programmer review the documents relevant to the M&E of the READ programme: programme implementation manual, logframe indicators, data and reporting formats.

2. **Setting up data input forms.** The data input forms are selected on the basis of indicators, in line with the requirements set out in the logframe and appropriate for the reporting period.



3. **Setting up the format for data output.**

The specific format for presentation of the data analysis also depends on the requirements of the report. The output format is designed to be compatible with two different types of reporting needs: output indicators and RIMS indicators.

4. **Designing the application system.** The programmer designs an M&E application system, based on the existing AWPB and RKAKL templates. The programming took two months and did not face any significant setbacks. (This was quite an accomplishment, considering the scale of the challenge of designing new forms that are inter-operable with two different templates).

5. **Testing of new M&E software application system.** The testing was done in Palu City and was attended by all M&E officers from the district. At the event, the programmer described the new system, and guided the officers through the process of inputting information, step by step. After trying out the new software, they provided valuable user feedback, which was used to revise and improve the software.

6. **Dissemination of fully operational software application.** The dissemination took place in Banggai City. This was a massive training operation, which included all READ M&E officers. The management team and the programmer outlined the new system, its improvements, and guided the officers in test runs.

Using the M&E information system

Data entry starts at the level of the District Management Unit (DMU). Based on written reports from project officers, the M&E officer enters the AWPB data into the system on a monthly basis (quarterly and annual reviews are also completed to check for emerging trends). Once this step is complete, M&E officers save the file in a remote server and send a copy of the file to the National Supporting Unit (NSU) via email. The NSU M&E officer retrieves the data, compiles and correlates these across various characteristics (districts, types of activities, timeline, etc.), and conducts a comprehensive analysis. The results are presented as a report, highlighting the financial and activity performance of the entire programme. The final output report describes the target goals and corresponding performance, according to the logframe and RIMS indicators. The report is then submitted to the managers at each unit level, where it will be used to guide decisionmaking.

The value of improved monitoring

The new data gathering and presentation tools provided a quick and reliable review of the implementation of project activities on a monthly basis. For one project activity that monitors the revolving fund, the November data indicated that it was being distributed at a much lower volume than planned. The provincial level manager could access the information and check which areas were underperforming. After discussions with district-level project officers, the team uncovered the cause. The community groups that were formed to access the funds had not yet fulfilled the eligibility criteria (adequate bookkeeping) for receiving the funds. Thus, additional actions (training sessions) could be designed to help these groups access this much-needed financial assistance.

Main benefits and lessons learned

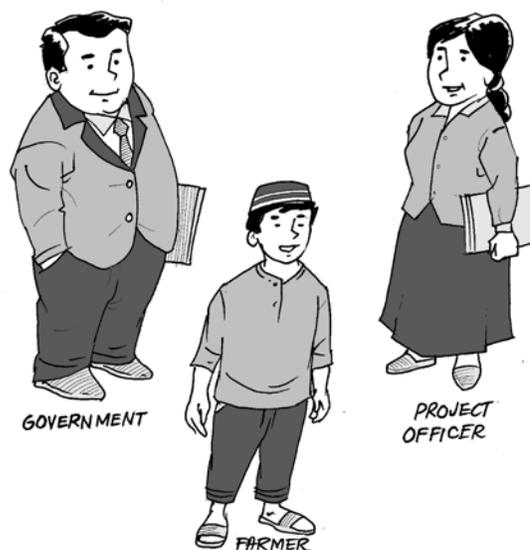
- **Improved data processing.** Data are entered once and can be used and reused for various types of reports. In case a correction has to be made, the data can be quickly and easily accessed. Once data are entered into servers, it is kept secure with protection software and regularly backed up using other remote servers.
- **Interoperability.** The software was developed using both IFAD and Indonesian government monitoring indicators, form templates and reporting guidelines. It essentially provided the Indonesian government with a streamlined monitoring software system that can be used to compare impact across government projects as well as across interventions by other key development actors.
- **Simplified reporting.** M&E information systems make it very easy to classify output, outcome and impact indicators as well as to generate the associated reports.
- **Improved response time.** Regularly compiled M&E data and impact indicators improve response time in project management. If serious problems arise at the DMU level, the management teams at the NSU level have access to broad metrics that can paint a much more detailed picture than can be obtained through phone calls.
- **Streamlined data gathering.** Developments in information and communication technology (ICT) provide opportunities for streamlining data gathering and developing improved data processing systems for RBM. The data can be used as input by the management to exercise oversight functions and improve performance.
- **User-friendly and accessible.** If designed properly, digital M&E systems can be simple, fast and very user-friendly. The required hardware, a single personal computer per input point, is also simple to use and not very expensive.
- **Increased efficiency.** The workload for data entry and analysis of project result is reduced, freeing up valuable staff resources. It also reduces the time needed for integrating and processing data, in addition to shortening the feedback loop.

The remaining challenges

There are several main challenges for the implementation of the new M&E information system. All M&E officers should be trained and be able to operate the system well. Next, the M&E officers should be sufficiently motivated, by engaging them in meaningful tasks, and regularly monitored to make sure that they provide consistent and valid updates of the required data. The final challenge is ensuring that the M&E information system works without technical glitches that may jeopardize data integrity. Protecting the system from virus infections is of grave importance. To respond to some of these challenges, the READ management has planned additional training sessions for M&E officers in the use of M&E information systems.

Conclusion

Streamlining M&E information systems greatly improves the quality and processing of data transmission, integration and analysis. It also improves project operations, as it enables the project staff and management teams to make (informed) decisions more quickly and thus be able to better respond to emerging needs. Interoperable M&E information systems can provide high-quality logframe indicators—impact, output and outcome—which can be compared with data gathered from other projects that work on the same target groups. Especially when several agencies work closely together (in this case, the Indonesian government and IFAD), there is an additional effect of synergy between projects, which maximises benefits to final beneficiaries.



Acronyms and abbreviations

AWPB	annual work plan and budgets
DMU	District Management Unit
ICT	information and communication technology
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
MTR	mid-term review
NSU	National Supporting Unit
READ	Rural Empowerment and Agricultural Development Programme
RKAKL	Rencana Kerja dan Anggaran Kementerian dan Lembaga

Acknowledgements

The author would like to give special thanks to the following partners who are committed to the development and application of the M&E information system. Their support was essential in making this paper a reality:

Mr Asep Suryaman, READ Programme Manager

Mr Noeryudiono, Computer Programmer

Mr Jaka Suryana, M&E Consultant

Bio-sketch and contact details

Mr. Diding Hardedi is M&E Officer in the Rural Empowerment and Agricultural Development (READ) Programme in Indonesia. He has 2 years of M&E experience on IFAD-funded projects. He has a masters' degree in management and is also registered as planner at the Ministry of Agriculture. Mr. Hardedi can be reached via email: hardedididing@yahoo.com.