

Practical Monitoring and Evaluation Considerations and Tools for IFAD Field Practitioners



Effective M&E relies on the proper functioning of the overall M&E system, which is typically composed of the following elements:

- **Organizational structure:** The location of the M&E functions in the organisation and the support and incentives provided for its effective functioning ultimately demonstrate commitment and determine the extent it can leverage decision making towards higher achievement of results.
- **Human capacity:** The collection and assessment of data require support to local partners in order to enable them to appreciate and utilize the M&E systems for their benefit.
- **Information management system** (computers, databases, quality control): These ensure that data are stored securely and are accessible, ensuring sharing of data with partners.
- **The monitoring and evaluation plan** (key questions, indicators, data collection and analysis method, dissemination, financial resources). The M&E plan is aligned to logframe indicators.

- **Learning culture** (standards, advocacy, demand for information, policies): A learning culture supports communication of experiences, sharing of knowledge and lessons learned and using information and analysis to make good decisions on policy challenges, successes or opportunities.

The M&E plan matrix

The M&E matrix below (Table 1) is useful for clearly identifying what data are needed, the source of data, how often they will be collected, by whom they will be collected, what methods will be used in collection, and finally in which reports and forums the data will be presented. The matrix is critical for establishing clear roles and responsibilities of FADIP and partners. It builds upon the information already contained in the logical framework and develops assumptions by identifying relevant indicators and ensuring that related data are collected, analysed and used.

Table 1. The M&E matrix.

Logframe element	Indicators (including targets)	Baseline information			Means of Verification			
		Requirements	Status	Responsibilities	Data source	Frequency & cost of collection	Responsibility for collection & analysis	Collection method
Impact								
Outcomes								
Outputs								
Activities								

Table 2 below illustrates the process to be undertaken in completing the matrix. In some cases, it is simply a matter of copying information that is available in the FADIP logical framework or the more detailed outcome target and monitoring plan (Table 1 above). In other cases, some research, discussion and agreement with key stakeholders may need to be undertaken prior to inserting the information.

Table 2. Stages in preparing the M&E matrix.

Stage	Information to be included in each column of the matrix
1. Logframe element	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enter in Column 1 the main statements contained in the logical framework for Impact, Outcome, Output, Activities, and, if monitored, Assumptions.
2. Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enter in Column 2 the main indicators. For Impact, Outcome and Outputs, the indicators contained in the operation logical framework should be inserted. The indicators must be specific, measurable, accurate, realistic and timely. Indicators may need to be developed and added at this stage, in the case of the main assumptions.

Stage	Information to be included in each column of the matrix
3. Baseline requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decide what kind of comparison needs to be made to measure change (e.g., before/after programme; with/without programme, control group, etc.) and enter in Column 3 what base case information is needed for this comparison.
4. Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enter in Column 4 the status of the information—does it exist in secondary sources? Does it need to be collected? When will it be available?
5. Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enter in Column 5 who will be responsible for collecting the baseline information.
6. Data source	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enter in Column 6 the source of future data—the primary or secondary data source that will provide information about each indicator (e.g., statistics or records; programme accounts; nutrition survey; etc.).
7. Frequency of collection and cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enter in Column 7 the frequency of collection and costs related to each indicator listed in Column 3. Specify how often primary data will be collected or secondary data analysed (e.g., quarterly, annually, at end of phase, etc.), and the budget required for each stage.
8. Responsibility for collection and analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enter in Column 8 the organisation or unit or individual responsible for collecting and/or analysing the data.
9. Collection method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enter in Column 9 how the data are being collected (for example, surveys or focus group meetings) and which forms will be used.
10. Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enter in Column 10 in which report(s) the information will be included (for example, semi-annual progress report; programme completion report, final evaluation, etc.).
11. Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enter in Column 11 at which forums or meetings the information or report will be presented and discussed (e.g., quarterly management meetings; annual progress review workshop).
12. Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review draft matrix with key stakeholders and revise it. Ensure that indicators can be measured at reasonable cost by existing means or by procedures to be developed by FADIP. Ensure that responsibilities are clearly assigned. Check that activity and output indicators are derived from management recordkeeping and internal analysis.

Developing data collection forms

Once the M&E matrix is completed, it is necessary to develop specific forms that (a) enable the responsible partner/actor/staff to collect data efficiently and effectively and (b) are appropriate for data entry processes. Data collection should be decentralised to those partners that have a direct interest in learning of progress at different levels—for example, VCCOs can report on sales growth and member performance; resorts can report on the quality of produce received; staff can provide briefings on leadership issues or socioeconomic changes in visited programme areas through their trip reports; service providers can report on training results and future training needs; etc. Assessment of outcomes from training can be measured through knowledge, attitude and practice surveys.

For additional guidance on data collection methods, see the WFP guide hyperlinked below:
http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ko/mekb_module_13.pdf

Preparing field reports

During field work, project staff should seek to provide feedback to the M&E system by undertaking the following, subject to time availability relative to key tasks assigned in the travel terms of reference:

- Gauge progress towards achieving the operation's objectives;
- Determine beneficiaries' perceptions and reactions to FADIP activities and assistance;
- Assess ownership and utilisation of assets created and identify any negative effects;
- Assess the quantity and quality of work undertaken and the appropriateness of other activities;
- Make physical checks of assets, inputs or other distributed items, if any;
- Help managers and partners identify problems and make decisions to overcome them;
- Establish productive relationships with local government and implementing partners; and
- Ensure that men and women beneficiaries are fully involved in implementation and monitoring of the operation.

Collecting data from community visits

These debriefing reports complement any data collection that is prescribed within the M&E plan. Data from field visits provide critical information for management to make decisions about operations. Selection of people to interview is one important element of ensuring that the information required is effectively collected. Persons (women, men, boys and girls) you will interview or discuss with in the field are called 'respondents'. Examples of potential 'respondents':

- Children, boys and girls;
- Women head of households;
- Men and women beneficiaries individually and in groups;

- Community representatives, local leaders, traditional leaders, both men and women;
- Local government officials, district government officials;
- Technical staff;
- Donor, NGO representatives active in the operation area;
- Private sector representatives (e.g., market vendors, truckers); and
- MoFA or other government staff working on the Island.

Selecting the right people to interview is largely determined by the data staff come to collect. These data are defined in the indicators listed in the logical framework and correspond with various data sources. Visits to the field are one of these data sources.

Respondent criteria should be selected ahead of time based on who is in the best position to answer the questions you will ask or topics you will raise. For example, if you intend to ask about child nutrition, it is often best to ask mothers rather than village leaders or others in the field site.

The number of total interviews or group discussions is determined beforehand when sampling decisions are being made and should not be left to interpretation in the field. Deciding on the number is usually a balance between enough for a fair 'representation' and a reasonable workload given the time and financial resources available.

The number of participants in group sessions is determined by the method. Different qualitative methods have a suggested number of participants based on an understanding of how the number of people positively and negatively affects the discussion.

Once you have identified the ideal respondents, you must devise a method for selecting them in the field. The two most common methods are random selection and purposive selection and both have their merits:

- Purposive selection, intentionally selecting individuals because you think they are in the best position to provide you with accurate data, is used in qualitative and rapid data collection methods. This is especially true for key informant interviews where specific individuals (e.g., women head of households, adolescent girls, community leaders, traditional healers, etc.) may be in a better position to discuss topics or answer questions than the average respondent.
- Random selection can be done in many different ways and has less selection bias than purposive selection if done properly. Random selection of individual respondents or participants in group discussions is often a good technique to use when everyone wants to participate and your method or time constraints demand limited participation. If the random selection method is explained to all potential respondents in a group, most individuals readily accept the fact that they have or have not been chosen for participation.

Interview and discussion guides, checklists, or questionnaires

Regardless of the data collection method being used, a written interview or discussion guide, checklist or questionnaire is critical for ensuring the following:

- All key issues are covered during the field visit;
- Questions or points for discussion are uniformly applied, regardless of when the field visit is conducted or who conducts it;
- The methods and questions used in monitoring are consistent across time and place (M&E strategies that rely on individuals are avoided, and a system is established and put in place); and
- Data analysts clearly understand the questions or topics discussed and are able to make sense of the answers received (especially outlying or uncommon answers).

Using interview and discussion guides, checklists or questionnaires. The data collection methods that can be used range from a formal questionnaire in which answers are ticked or filled in by enumerators (i.e., data collectors) to an informal list of three to five points that should be brought up during a community discussion. Selection of the appropriate option is largely driven by the type of collection method being used.

Familiarising data collection teams with the content. Regardless of whether a formal questionnaire or a checklist of points for key informants is being used for interviews, the people applying the tool in the field must become familiar with that tool before using it with real respondents. This is critical for ensuring that the tool does not become a burden or disruption to the rapport established with respondents. An informal exchange of thoughts and ideas can be ruined by a data collector who is obviously reading straight from a sheet of paper. An experienced and well-prepared data collector reviews the points prior to meeting with respondents and then glances over them once more at the end of the session in order to ensure that no key points have been missed.

Data collectors should not limit themselves to the topics listed, especially when using qualitative methods. For almost all participatory and rapid methods, data collectors should develop follow-up questions related to respondents' answers. The list of topics or discussion points on a checklist should serve only to remind the data collector of key issues to bring up and should not limit or prevent discussion of other topics.

Pretesting and adjustment. Prior to undertaking a large-scale data collection exercise, it is important that formal questionnaires are pretested to ensure that they will work in the field. It is also critical to spend an adequate number of days training data collection teams for formal or large-scale surveys. Teams are often composed of hired "outsiders", and it is essential that all data collectors understand the intention behind each question in the same way so as to ensure consistency in the questions' application and explanation to respondents. This also applies to discussion guides or checklists for which the key points and the intent behind raising specific topics should be reviewed prior to fieldwork. Discussion guides and checklists should be adjusted if, during the first few applications of the tools or during the first few attempts to analyse the data, additional points are found to be necessary.

Translation. All questionnaires, checklists or discussion guides must be translated into the language in which the interviews, discussions or meetings will be held. Data collectors in the field should not be expected to translate during the course of interviews or discussions because this will lead to inconsistent translation among collectors, or even by the same collector when meeting with subsequent groups or individuals.

Data collection versus data analysis. Taking notes during an interview or discussion, regardless of the methodology being used, is critical for ensuring that what the respondents say is accurately captured. A common error is for data collectors to interpret or analyse what respondents have said prior to writing it down.

It is crucial to separate data collection from data analysis and to avoid assuming that you know what the respondent meant. Data collectors should be encouraged to note any analytic insight that they might gain from their field experience, but this should not be confused with documenting what the respondents have actually said.

Key steps to follow in field interviews/ discussion

Data collection

1. Be sure to separate description and raw data collection from your own analysis, judgement, interpretation or insight.
2. Do not attempt to recall what was said in an interview or discussion at a later time (e.g., in the car or back at the office). Inevitably, such recalled data will be biased by your own insights and analysis.
3. Be disciplined and conscientious in taking detailed field notes at all stages of the fieldwork, including notes on how the fieldwork that was carried out differed from the fieldwork that was planned. Notes about how the respondents were selected (in relation to the planned sampling strategy) are important for assessing comparability among data collected from different sites and at different points in time.
4. Be descriptive when taking notes. While it is critical to document what respondents said, note also focus group participants' reactions to points that were made in the discussions as well as any other relevant visual observations that you make. The intent is to have data that describe accurately not only what was said but also the setting in which it was said.
5. Make notes that refer to the interview or discussion guide, checklist or questionnaire that you are using. It is often helpful to create the checklist with space for adding field notes, ensuring that each note is correctly situated under the relevant checklist point. Another option is to number the discussion guide or checklist points and refer to these numbers in your notes. For questionnaires, the usual practice is to leave space for ticking or filling in answers on the questionnaire itself.
6. Quote directly from interviews or discussions. This allows people to be represented in their own words and terms. It also provides powerful anecdotal evidence for reports, proposals, etc.
7. Use the notes that you have taken to confirm important points that are made in order to ensure that you have understood their intended meaning fully. Notes also facilitate cross-checking with other sources.
8. Even if you think that a point is not important, document it. This serves two purposes: the point may prove to be important either later in the interview/discussion or during analysis and your noting of every point assures respondents that you are being unbiased in what you document and giving each person's ideas equal value.
9. Do not let note-taking disrupt the flow of the conversation, interview or discussion. In one-on-one interviews, this is not usually a problem. In group settings, however, where your role as facilitator is paramount, the use of a facilitator and a separate note taker is the best approach.

The importance of critical reflection in ensuring impact

Collecting and analysing information is only one half of the M&E system. In fact, there is no point in collecting information if it is not used for decisionmaking. Without critical reflection, M&E data will not help for management and impact but will only meet the bureaucratic demands of M&E. Critical reflections are essential to move beyond collecting, processing and reviewing data. It leads to learning, by documenting and sharing decisions, and ensuring that decisions are implemented. In many cases, M&E systems give too much focus on data collection and disregard the end of the chain, which renders the system at best, weak and at worse, completely useless.

Critical reflection is the process of asking “why?”, “so what?”, and “now what?” after M&E data show what has happened. It can be done through

- questioning and analysing experiences, observations, beliefs and/or assumptions.
- interpreting experiences and data to create new insights and agreement on actions.
- questioning what is normally taken for granted, particularly programme assumptions.

Critical reflection can happen in any forum. It is however important to plan how to integrate a sequence of critical reflection events to ensure clarity of insight and decisions during programme implementation.

A wider agenda for communication of M&E results

Communication is a critical feature in the RBM agenda because it allows programme management to monitor progress, obtain timely warning of delay, promote collaboration and facilitate motivation through the participation of partners and team members. The programme needs an effective information system that provides continuous and frequent reports—giving supporting evidence of (or lack of) progress. The programme team must therefore monitor its own progress with respect to specific, real and measurable achievements/setbacks, which are formally reported.

Two sets of M&E findings need to be communicated. Firstly, draft M&E findings should be discussed with implementing partners and primary stakeholders in order to get feedback on accuracy, reach joint conclusions and agree on next steps. Once the M&E findings are agreed upon, these can be communicated to funding agencies, cooperating institutions, government departments and other programmes.

Furthermore, a good communication strategy can generate more support and interest in the programme. The M&E system should enable the PIU to identify lessons learned, best practices and innovations. The programme should make sure that these success stories are communicated and, when relevant information is available, articles and photos could be prepared. Local journalists can also be contacted to ensure best practices are mentioned in the local media for wider dissemination.

Quantitative versus qualitative data collection

Quantitative methods help to answer questions such as who, how much and how many. Quantitative research uses methods adopted from the physical sciences that are designed to ensure objectivity, reliability and the ability to generalise. They seek to exert maximum control over the questions and potential answers and most often incorporate probability sampling methods to allow for statistical inference to the larger study population. The researcher is considered external to the actual research, and results are expected to be replicable no matter who conducts the research. Quantitative methods are useful in the following situations:

- When 'accurate' and 'precise' data are required;
- When sample estimates will be used to infer something about the larger population with the support of statistical theory;
- To test whether there is a statistical relationship between variables;
- To produce evidence to prove that a particular problem exists, or to justify a particular strategy; and
- To identify the characteristics of a population (for example, during a baseline survey).

Qualitative research methods are designed to provide the researcher with the perspective of target audience members through immersion in their culture or situation and through direct interaction with them. These methods help to answer questions such as how and why. The focus is on presenting perceptions, judgments, and opinions and on explaining meanings, processes and reasons.

Qualitative interviews differ from traditional structured interviews, in which formal questionnaires are used, by not being limited to a set of predetermined questions to be asked in sequence. The following gives the characteristics of six key techniques that are employed interdependently when using qualitative methods:

- **Triangulation**-This refers to the process of cross-checking information. Triangulation uses multidisciplinary teams that include different skills, experience and viewpoints; a range of tools and techniques for data collection and analysis; and different sources of information about the same problem. In this way, the reliability and bias of findings can be assessed and, if necessary, addressed.
- **Multidisciplinary approach**-People with different skills, experience and viewpoints will look for different views, perspectives and analysis of a given topic, and the team as a whole will obtain new and deeper insights when these different perspectives are shared. Women and men should always be included on the team, as should members of the community or group in question.

- **Mixing techniques**-Using different techniques gives greater depth to the information collected. Typically, the team would aim to use a mixture of interview and discussion techniques, diagrams and mapping and direct observation.
- **Community involvement**-Most activities are performed jointly with the community or by the community on its own.
- **Flexibility and on-the-spot analysis**-Plans and methods are semistructured and discussed and modified as fieldwork proceeds. The team constantly reviews and analyses its findings to decide how to continue. As understanding increases, emerging issues and unexpected findings come more clearly into focus, and plans, topics and methods can be revised.
- **Offsetting bias**-The team should constantly seek to identify possible sources of error and bias and see how they influence findings. Views should be obtained from a cross-section of the community or group, including women and children and other vulnerable groups. This may require advance training in skills such as gender awareness, communicating with children, etc.