

SAS² Monitoring and Evaluation

This Guide shows how to design evidence-based and people-based inquiries that address the questions that people ask, at the right time and with the proper tools. The questions may be part of a problem or needs assessment, a strategic planning exercise, a risk assessment or a feasibility study. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) questions such as “What are the results or impacts of our program or project thus far?”, or “How well is the program or project using its resources?” can also be answered using SAS² concepts and tools. As with any SAS² inquiry, the skills needed to ask and answer M&E questions for a certain context include knowing how to ground the inquiry in a real learning process, select the correct techniques, scale the inquiry to the right level, and mediate different views of the M&E process and its findings.

M&E plays an important role in many projects and programs. The exercise usually involves a review of progress along the way (midstream monitoring) and then an assessment of the results of the project or program once it has ended (downstream evaluation). The goals and activities people want to monitor and evaluate are as varied as the projects and programs they are involved in. So are the baseline conditions against which the activities are assessed. Each project and program must decide what to monitor or evaluate. Sometimes, all activities must be evaluated against their expected results and goals. In other cases, a set or sub-set of activities needs to be looked at, each with its own objective and expected results. How M&E is done also depends on the context and purpose of the exercise. No single set of M&E steps or methods is useful in all situations. That’s why we believe M&E is more of an art than a science.

Despite the need for flexibility in the design of M&E, certain methods and frameworks, each with their own vocabulary, are commonly used and required. Almost every major development agency and institution has its own approach to M&E that staff and partners must apply. Some common problems with these methods are that:

- The process is driven by outside experts, and the people directly involved are mostly excluded from design of that process;
- The methods make poor use of the actors’ own knowledge and local forms of evaluation and learning;

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- They focus on accounting for resources and neglect learning and adapting to changing circumstances;
- They use questions and ways of answering questions that are fixed in advance and do not evolve over time or adjust to the people's real needs;
- They assume high levels of certainty and predictable links between causes and effects (or between inputs and outputs, outcomes and impact);
- They draw sharp lines between research, planning, action, monitoring and evaluation, and often isolate people doing these different tasks from each other;
- They span a long time, require a high level of effort, and may not interact with other aspects of other project or program processes, such as planning.

While many methods try to address some of these problems, we believe that efforts to create comprehensive M&E methods that work in all contexts are misguided. This Guide does not treat M&E as a special form of inquiry that requires established concepts or special bundles of techniques. Instead, it defines M&E as any inquiry that addresses, at any time, the relationship between planned action and observed results. From this viewpoint, there are no M&E frameworks or methods per se, only M&E questions. Any tool or technique, whether it's a soil test or a conflict assessment using local stories, can be used to monitor or evaluate relationships between planned action and observed results, provided it is the right technique to answer the right question at the right time.

The Process Management method described in the previous section of the Guide is a flexible planning approach that helps design M&E procedures for specific project plans. It introduces rigour in planning and at the same time integrates M&E into broader processes that are grounded in real learning situations. You can incorporate M&E into your *Process Manager* plans by following four basic steps:

1. Identify and record the specific project **activities** in your *Process Manager* map or other planning framework that require formal evaluation during the project or at the end. Be aware that some activities do not need to be evaluated formally because there is no pressing need or

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the results are clear (for example, fund raising activity may not need to be evaluated once the money has been raised).

2. Ask **why** monitoring or evaluation is needed in each case: is it for accounting to the funding agency, for ongoing planning by project members, or to tell your project story to a broader audience? Make sure that you know how the M&E results will be used in each case.
3. Decide **who** you're doing M&E for and who you should do it with.
4. Based on your response to the previous points, determine **how** to do the M&E for each activity or set of activities (and related objectives or expected results), with what information and techniques, at what time, and at what level of detail?

This M&E design process starts with project activities (goal-oriented actions) rather than the general and specific objectives (action-oriented goals) typical of Result-Based Management frameworks. While both planning strategies connect activities and their objectives or expected results, action-oriented goals (such as promoting democratic management of forest resources in a certain region) tend to be abstract and overly ambitious compared to goal-oriented actions (for example, setting up a multistakeholder committee to manage a region's forest resources more fairly). This makes the former difficult to monitor and evaluate. Goal-oriented actions are more grounded, and closer to the day-to-day language that people use to make plans and assess their progress.

The *Guidelines for SAS² Events and Process Design* and techniques such as *Information G.A.S* help you **select** and combine the right techniques and the evidence you need based on a clear idea of the context, purpose, and expected uses of your M&E process. The right tool for a certain M&E process may come from SAS², or it may come from another source. When possible, M&E plans should use local methods that are already in place and have worked well (see *Just Do It !*). When it's time to select the technique, determine how best to combine qualitative analysis (such as storytelling) and quantitative information (data displayed in tables and drawings). If you need data, you should decide whether or not to create SMART indicators (specific, measurable, applicable, realistic, and timely) that can reduce complex results to simpler forms, thus helping you measure progress.

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The *Guidelines* and a technique such as *Validation* also help you **scale** your M&E process, by defining the level of information and consensus that is “good enough” in a certain context.

Deciding to scale your assessment up or down will depend on the purpose of your M&E, as well as the time and the resources available. It will also depend on the real scale or complexity of a program or a project. For example, unlike single-site assessments, multi-site evaluations often require a scaling up of M&E tools, to produce findings that capture not only the similarities and differences between local activities but also their complex interactions at broader levels.

The art of M&E involves selecting the right techniques, and then scaling the information to be gathered and analyzed according to your needs. M&E is also a matter of proper **timing**. Where project and program goals are mostly technical or where you can predict key factors, detailed planning of M&E activities in advance may be possible (see the *Socratic Wheel* example). The M&E process may then include plans to do the assessment twice: at the start of a process, before action begins, and then at the end to see if things have changed as planned. More often, however, projects and programs involve many goals and stakeholders interacting in unpredictable settings. Some goals may not be shared by all parties and may not be stable over time. This may force people to respond to unforeseen circumstances ‘in the middle’ of complex situations (as in the *Katkari* example for *Process Manager*, above). *Process Manager* helps manage these complex situations. Some techniques, such as *Order & Chaos*, will help assess how predictable things are and how sure stakeholders are that they can attain their goals. The less certain they are, the more monitoring and continuous planning they may need. The technique *What If?* also helps track factors that people find hard to predict and that may greatly affect their planned actions and the results they desire.

Process Manager helps you respond flexibly to both pressing needs and longer-term goals. This allows people to design M&E processes that evolve along the way, as project needs change, and in response to situations that may not have been foreseen. Whether the M&E process is for accounting purposes or to support learning and social action, a rigid package or method cannot replace judgment and creativity in combining methods and techniques and using them in the right circumstances. To succeed, M&E must be systematic as well as grounded and ‘systemic’, which means doing the assessment at the right time, when it is truly needed.

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