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2. PRINCIPLES OF MONITORING, REVIEW AND EVALUATION

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to help the reader develop an understanding of some key monitoring, review and evaluation issues and principles.

The chapter includes sections on:-

- definitions
- plans and projects, and
- management information systems

Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 then deal respectively with monitoring, review, short visits and evaluation in an operational context.

2.2 Definitions

There is no universal agreement as to what ground the terms monitoring, review and evaluation should cover and there is an element of personal preference in establishing the demarcation between them. The important thing is to gain agreement on basic principles and definitions with those agencies and individuals you work directly with.

The definitions given below distinguish between activities that are essential to support project implementation (monitoring and regular reviews) and activities that serve a broader and more reflective purpose (mid-term reviews and evaluations).

2.2.1 Monitoring

Monitoring involves the collection, analysis, reporting and use of information about the project's progress and initial impact. It is primarily a management responsibility and should continue throughout the life of a project. Monitoring systems and procedures should provide the mechanism by which relevant information is provided to the right people at the right time to help them make decisions.

Monitoring should highlight strengths and weaknesses in project implementation and enable the responsible personnel to deal with problems, improve performance, build on successes and adapt to changing circumstances.

Monitoring should focus on:-

- physical progress (input provision, work programs, service delivery) and process (management and local capacity building);
- the preliminary response by targeted community members to project activities (knowledge, attitudes and practices);
- reasons for any unexpected or adverse response by the target group; and
- financial matters (budget and expenditure).

Monitoring is also essential for purposes of accountability to the project's official funders and public supporters and to the people affected by the project.

It is important to remember, however, that much of what actually happens in any rural development context (with or without a project) is heavily influenced by factors not under the control of any one of the project stakeholders, nor amenable to monitoring in the sense described above. It is useful to distinguish between monitoring and 'scanning' (see Moris & Copeland, 1993). Those responsible for managing field level service delivery activities have to continuously scan the external environment to understand what is likely to happen as part of the big-picture. Will resources be made available on time? Is the community still angry about the car crash? Can we get the water engineer to come as planned given the re-organisation occurring in the health department? Will the drought break soon? Has that character in the planning unit done anything about the re-vote request? Will the Minister approve the logging permit?

These matters have to be tracked and assessed (monitored), but not in the way that one monitors the internal progress of a project

against what was planned. In this respect managers have to rely on their own experience, skills, contacts and powers of prediction and influence.

The different ways in which monitoring may be carried out by project field managers is extremely varied. Different circumstances, people and skills will require different approaches and tools. Further discussion on monitoring issues and options is provided in Chapter 3.

2.2.2 Regular review

Project reviews should be carried out regularly and should aim to involve all the key stakeholders concerned with managing, or supporting, project implementation. Reviews may be carried out at different levels within the management structure, at different times and with varying frequency. Different review activities need not involve all stakeholders at the same time (e.g. regular field level reviews may be conducted that only involve field based staff).

The main purpose of reviews is to share information and perspectives on project progress, identify management action that may be required to keep the project on track or to overcome constraints, and to agree on who should take the required action, when and how. Review findings and decisions should be fed back into planning to help keep operational plans updated and relevant. The information generated by monitoring and review should also provide the basis on which stakeholders account to one another, including to community participants.

Reviews thus provide the opportunity for project implementers to further analyse the information collected through monitoring, reflect on the implications, make informed decisions and take appropriate management action to support implementation. Reviews should be conducted in a participatory manner and encourage the development of a consensus

among implementing partners and communities about what is going well and what isn't and what needs to be done. They should not be viewed as simply 'talk shops' however. Their main purpose is decision making and they must be action oriented.

Reviews are normally carried out at pre-determined points in time (e.g. every six months, annually or to fit in with an agricultural or community activity cycle). They may however be conducted on an ad-hoc basis when problems suddenly arise that need to be addressed. The frequency of reviews should be determined through clearly specifying their purpose, deciding on who is expected to attend and contribute, reviewing existing monitoring and review systems within implementing agencies and taking into account the reporting and review requirements of donors. The scope and duration of a project will also influence the choice of appropriate review frequency.

Reviews which are conducted with external assistance and which mainly serve external purposes (such as donor led mid-term reviews) are considered to be part of evaluation and are dealt with in Chapter 6 of the Guide.

2.2.3 Evaluation

Evaluation can be distinguished from monitoring and review by:-

- its scope (broader - being concerned with whether or not the right objectives and the right strategy was chosen);
- its timing (less frequent - mid-term, completion or ex-post);
- those involved (may incorporate external or 'independent' personnel); and
- the users and use of the results (including planners and policy makers concerned with more strategic issues, rather than just managers responsible for implementing the tasks in hand).

The DAC Expert Group on Aid Evaluation (mainly bilateral donor agencies) has agreed on the following definition for evaluation:-

"An evaluation is an assessment, as systematic and objective as possible, of an on-going or completed project, program or policy, its design, implementation and results. The aim is to determine the relevance and fulfilment of objectives, developmental efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability."

This is a complex statement but it covers the different elements involved in an evaluation.

Useful evaluations are unfortunately rare because they tend to be over ambitious, top-down and methodologically difficult to carry out effectively. Despite these problems evaluation remains important and its usefulness needs to be improved. Strengthening monitoring and review systems is one part of the solution, as evaluations depend significantly on the information regularly collected and reported through monitoring and review activities. If monitoring systems do not work, evaluation is made more difficult.

More effective evaluation can also be supported by involving implementing partners and targeted communities in evaluating projects for themselves. Participatory evaluation approaches with communities are well described in such texts as 'Partners in Evaluation' (Feuerstein, 1994).

Evaluations should offer opportunities for organisation's to be reflective about the quality of their work and the appropriateness of their strategies. They should attempt to draw lessons from the experience gained to guide future planning and action. Lessons drawn from project failures and shortcomings are as important as lessons drawn from successful outcomes.

Ideas and tools to support the development of more practical and useful approaches to designing and conducting project evaluations are presented in Chapter 6.

2.3 Plans and projects

2.3.1 Why plan?

While this Guide is not specifically about planning, the topic is so important in the context of monitoring, review and evaluation, that some principles need to be made clear.

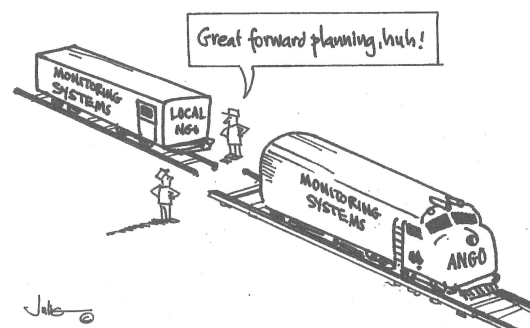
The purpose of having a set of project planning procedures is to help ensure that projects have been carefully thought through, and that they:-

- are within the scope of identified priorities
- address clearly identified problems and target groups
- are technically feasible
- have a realistic implementation schedule
- are accurately costed
- are manageable given resource and management capacity constraints
- are socially and economically desirable, and
- will provide sustainable benefits.

The planning process, if carried out in a participatory manner, also allows different stakeholders to exchange ideas, accommodate different needs and negotiate an acceptable plan of action.

Project planning helps the stakeholders to analyse options and make choices between different project proposals (through project appraisal). Design documentation also provides a record of what was initially planned which should help guide implementation and provide an agreed framework within which to start monitoring and reviewing progress.

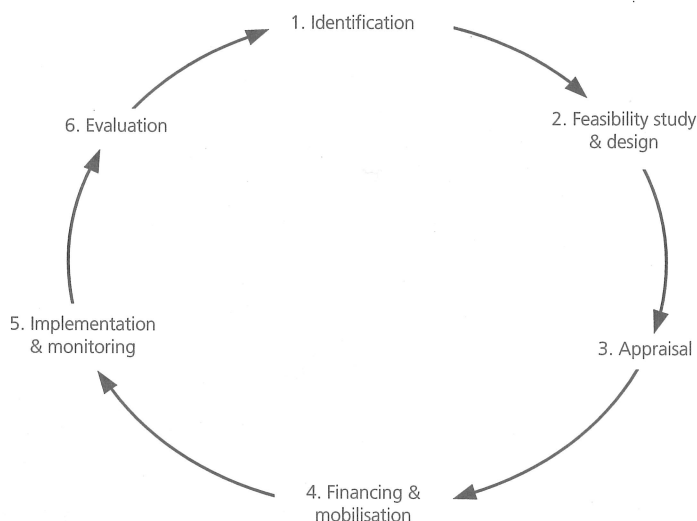
Project plans are an essential management tool.



In the context of monitoring, review and evaluation, the key additional points to be made about plans are that:-

- the design must incorporate appropriate activities and adequate resources to allow the required monitoring, review and evaluation to be carried out (otherwise it almost certainly won't happen);
- operational plan documentation must be regularly reviewed and revised as circumstances demand - plans are there to guide but not constrain (keeping in context such things as engineering and architectural designs which must meet certain specifications and standards); and
- planning does not happen just at the beginning of a rural development project - it is an integral part of ongoing project management, monitoring and review.

Fig 2. Project Cycle



2.3.2 The project cycle

The project cycle concept aims to emphasise two main points:-

- project development should pass through a series of consecutive steps to help ensure that projects are well planned, properly appraised, adequately resourced and effectively implemented; and that
- lessons learned during implementation should be fed back into the planning process to improve the design and implementation of future initiatives.

A typical project cycle is shown in Figure 2.

Keep in mind, however, that planning does not just happen at the beginning of the cycle. Plans must be regularly reviewed and revised to incorporate lessons learned during implementation to ensure that they remain relevant and up to date. This point is illustrated and emphasised in Figure 3.

2.3.3 The project 'box'

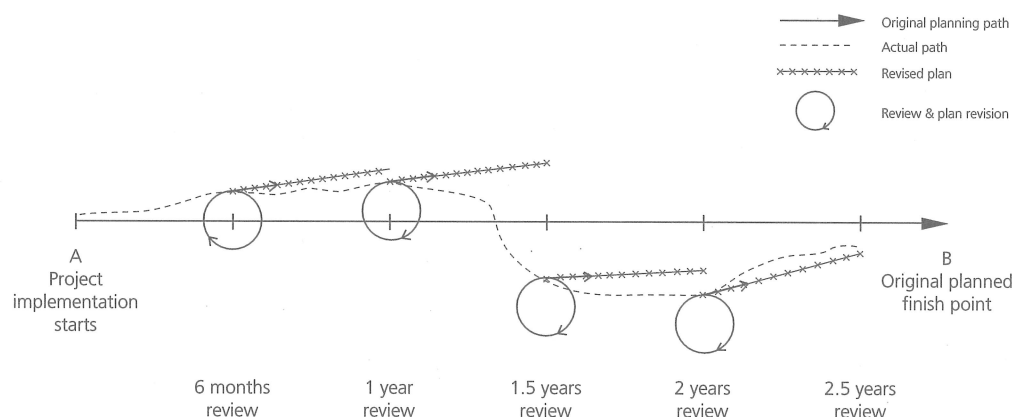
When we talk about 'projects', what do we mean? A brief definition is useful to help ensure that there is a common understanding of what a project is.

A project usually has the following characteristics. It has:-

- a specific objective, outputs and activities
- an estimated start and a finish date
- a specific geographic location (or area of coverage) and targeted beneficiaries
- clearly specified inputs and costs

Projects should be identified and designed within the context of ongoing '**programs**', where these exist. Projects provide the detailed investment and management plans which should support the attainment of broader program objectives.

Fig 3. Planning During Implementation



Similarly, program specification should be undertaken within the context of 'policy' statements and priorities. This relationship between policies, programs and projects is illustrated in Figure 4, using an agricultural sector example.

While it is useful to understand the **difference** between what is technically a project, and what is an ongoing program, there are also **similarities**. Both programs and projects require the same types of inputs and the same management skills if they are to be effectively implemented. Project planning skills can therefore be equally useful in analysing and redesigning on-going programs.

The main advantages of the project approach are that:-

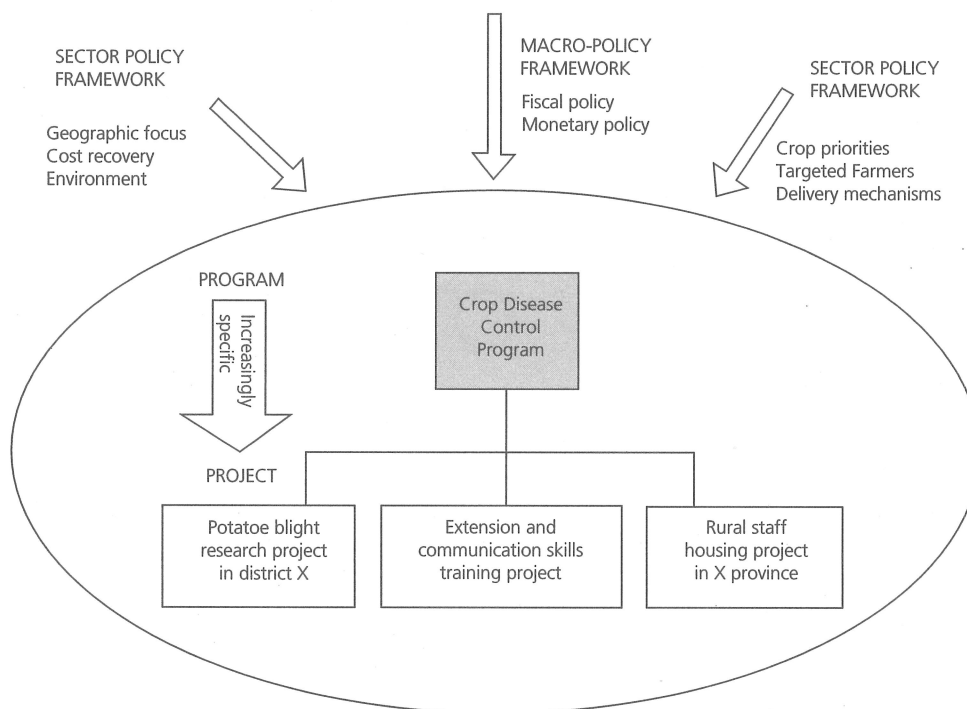
- it provides a conceptual boundary within which detailed information on specific issues can be collected and analysed;
- it requires specification of objectives, outputs, activities and inputs which in turn allows management roles and responsibilities to be clearly defined, work plans to be detailed and cash flows to be drawn up;
- it encourages conscious and systematic examination of alternatives; and

- it facilitates control of, and accounting for, investment funds by both implementers and funders

The main limitations of the project approach are that:-

- if project design is poor due to unavailability of reliable data or flawed analysis (garbage in) then clearly the resulting investment is unlikely to yield the desired results (garbage out);
- it may disrupt the balance of government funding between ongoing program expenditures (funding recurrent activities and services) and projects, in that donors commonly require funding of project operating costs by recipient governments and these funds have an opportunity cost. This can impact negatively on the availability of operating funds for maintaining ongoing service delivery;
- it can encourage a too limited focus for analysing development/investment opportunities which does not adequately consider the wider policy-program and institutional context within which they must be made. Projects must be kept in context;
- it favours the new idea presented in a neatly defined package; rather than support to or modification of ongoing activities.

Fig 4. Policy, Program & Project Framework



Projects, by definition, have a defined scope and focus. As noted above, this is one of their advantages as an investment management tool. To be successful, however, they must be designed and implemented in such a way that external influences impacting on the project are recognised, accommodated and managed. These influences are particularly significant in any development context where a project is trying to influence, among other things, people's knowledge, attitudes and practices.

The project 'box' must therefore be a pervious and flexible one, able to absorb and accommodate external influences. Figure 5 illustrates this point.

2.3.4 Flexible plans - to guide and not constrain

The most common cause of breakdown in the effectiveness of planning systems is that after plans are prepared they are not updated and they become irrelevant. Given the time and resources spent on preparing plans, it is amazing how little they are used once the project is funded and underway. The planning exercise is largely seen as a one-off effort.

Rural development plans need to be prepared and managed in a different way. They need to be clearer in construction and documentation (more useable), they should be prepared as a guide (not a blueprint), implementers must be more involved in their preparation so they know how to use and update them, and appropriate authority must be given to field managers to review and revise plans and reallocate resources (while maintaining required accountability).

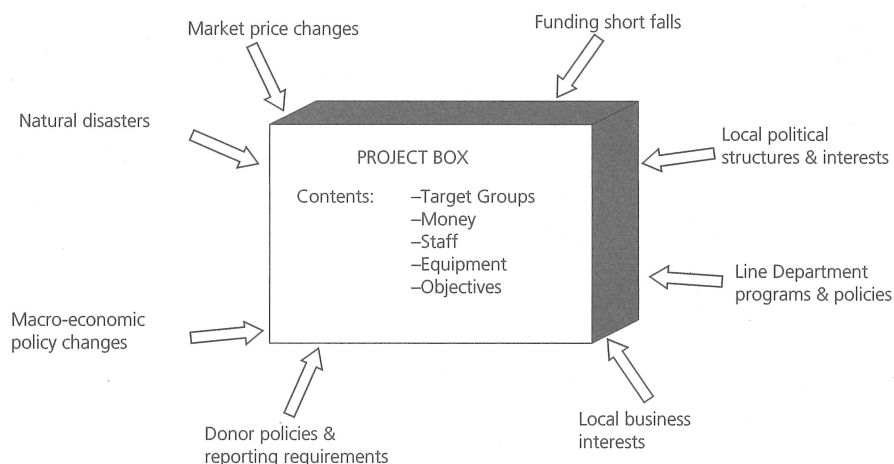
2.4 Management information systems

Monitoring and review activities need to be designed and undertaken within the context of existing project or program management systems and structures. When monitoring and review activities are not integrated with management systems, but rather carried out as ad-hoc or stand alone inputs (led by outsiders), their usefulness in terms of supporting implementation will be limited.

A management information system (MIS) is a set of organised procedures with three components:-

1. rules or criteria for deciding what information is required
2. a process and appropriate methods of data collection, analysis and reporting; and
3. a mechanism by which information is used to influence activities of the organisation.

Fig.5 The Project 'Box'



A useful definition of a MIS (which emphasises the **use** of information by managers) is:-

"A system which converts data from internal & external sources into information and communicates that information, in an appropriate form, to managers at all levels in all functions to enable them to take timely and effective decisions for planning, directing and controlling activities for which they are responsible."

Further ideas on the development of monitoring systems are contained in Chapter 3.

Minimum information systems

Collecting and processing information requires the commitment of time and resources. It is therefore important to collect and record only that information which is going to be usefully used. Too much information can be as bad as too little, if it is expensive and time-consuming to collect and is then not understood or used. The system must therefore be simple and practical. The opportunity cost of wasted information is high.



Useful concepts which emphasise this point are:-

- **Optimal Ignorance** (*Chambers, 1992*). This concept emphasises the simple fact that there are limits to the amount of information we can collect, absorb and effectively use. Not only are resources limited (e.g. time, staff, and equipment) but so is the capacity of our brain to handle the information. More information is not better information, and we often function best as managers when we remain ignorant of what we do not need to know.
- **Appropriate Imprecision** (*Ilchman, 1972*). In the same way that we can only usefully use a limited volume of information at any one time, so the level of detail must be appropriate to our decision making needs. The production of too much detail can be wasteful of limited resources (e.g. for collection and analysis) if it is not then used to influence our actions. One example of "inappropriate precision" would be reporting the percentage of people participating in a project (from a wider population group) as 79.89%. This would give a spurious implication that this level of precision could really be measured. Such figures would be better reported by at least rounding up or down to the nearest whole number.