

Perceptions and practices of monitoring and evaluation: international NGO experiences in Ethiopia

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Introduction

In an era in which accountability and cost effectiveness are at a premium, international NGOs (INGOs) are under pressure not only to improve their performance but also to be able to demonstrate this improvement. Indeed, criticisms of 'weak accountability mechanisms' and 'poor institutional learning' within INGOs are widespread. Such pressures can be traced back to several factors, including changes in management trends and the growing scarcity of donor funding in the face of the proliferation of Southern NGOs (Estrella and Gaventa 1998:3).

The division between INGO rhetoric and practice has also caused widespread concern within development circles, placing INGOs under further pressure to bridge this gap.¹ This pressure has focused INGO attention on the need to develop monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems that are capable of ensuring and demonstrating improved performance. It is against this background that the study reported in this paper analysed how eight large UK-based INGOs with programmes in Ethiopia have progressed along this M&E path.²

The findings support Oakley's (1996) general observation that a large gap exists between INGO assertions that M&E is a necessary and valuable activity and evidence of good quality practice in these areas, and suggest several reasons for this discrepancy. This paper explores the nature and interplay of such factors by reviewing current M&E policies among INGOs, perceptions of M&E held at different organisational levels within INGOs, and the translation of policies and perceptions into practice.

INGO monitoring and evaluation policies

The INGOs included in this study have a number of important differences in terms of size, professionalism, resources, number of

staff, and, consequently, M&E policies and practices. Nevertheless, despite these and other organisational idiosyncrasies, a review of relevant documentation reveals several common trends and concerns. First, the heightened preoccupation with effectiveness on the part of international donors has had a real impact on INGOs. Indeed, terms such as 'impact', 'performance', 'results', and 'accountability' have assumed a new prominence in M&E documentation, and questions of 'how INGO effectiveness can be gauged' have become far more common in the last five years.

A second observation is that although ten years ago few INGOs had moved beyond a simplistic understanding of M&E issues (specifically concerning the assessment of social development objectives), recent policy documents indicate a palpable desire by INGOs to explore and extrapolate pertinent lessons from M&E activities. Some INGOs have even started to develop qualitative indicators for the 'measurement' of intangible processes, such as 'decision making' and 'women's access to resources'. While there is little doubt that orthodox approaches to M&E still predominate,³ project documentation suggests that INGOs are currently experimenting with ways to develop more people-friendly and qualitatively oriented M&E systems.

The third observation highlights a fairly new trend within INGOs towards developing M&E systems at field level. In terms of rhetoric, at least, there appears to have been a slight shift away from the use of highly structured methods in favour of more flexible and participatory approaches. As Oakley *et al.* (1998:65) also concluded, the basis of evolving M&E systems appears to be 'perception, experience and proximity'. Policy papers confirm the gradual realisation by INGOs that M&E systems are more likely to be effective if they are made sensitive to, and developed within the immediate context of, projects themselves.

A more in-depth review reveals further interesting findings. For instance, although it is frequently assumed that 'monitoring' and 'evaluation' refer to the same activities across all INGOs, in fact INGOs do not have common definitions of, or approaches to, either of the two. Indeed, few INGOs have any definitions at all and a broad range of activities is assumed to constitute both types of activity. The policy documents of two INGOs studied, for instance, often used the term 'evaluation' interchangeably with 'review' and 'monitoring'. Further, although recognising that at the operational level M&E are separate tools, each with its own area of application and target groups, policy documents from at least three INGOs failed to make a clear distinction between the two.

Despite this lack of conceptual clarity, however, there is an underlying consensus on the importance of M&E functions. Hence, although few INGOs had specific policies in relation to M&E activities *per se*, all had attempted to outline official M&E-related requirements within their planning and reporting guidelines (e.g. ActionAid Ethiopia's 1995 *Report on the M&E Workshop* or ACORD's 1997 *Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Guidance Manual*).

Surprisingly, only two INGOs studied had separate Policy and Evaluation Units in their head offices. In general, M&E functions were increasingly incorporated into the mandates of regional and country desk offices.⁴ Despite such spatial differences, however, the procedures for M&E activities at the project level were actually structured along remarkably similar lines. Most INGOs had built-in hierarchical M&E frameworks that operated at four key organisational levels (i.e. Field, Country, Management, and Trustees) on the basis of indicators linked to the M&E objectives. Indeed, for the majority of INGOs, the process of 'monitoring' was part of a decentralised system of periodic data collection and reporting that frequently required the collation of quantitative data. Evaluations, on the other hand, were generally agreed to constitute data-collection processes that are performed mid-term through the project and/or at the end by staff from other programmes and external consultants.

At the time of this study, two INGOs⁵ (Plan International and CARE International) were completely restructuring their M&E activities and making significant conceptual and practical modifications. In both cases, the decision to make these changes had emerged from a general dissatisfaction with how evaluations, in particular, were being undertaken. This point is illustrated by the comment of one senior official who claimed that:

Evaluations as they now stand tend to have an ad hoc character and their primary purpose is to justify the existence of ongoing projects or provide a basis for future funding ... nothing more.

Indeed, this respondent referred to the previous M&E structure and procedures in his organisation as 'loose, open-ended, and detached' from the continuous programming processes and from the development of policy. Thus, in these two INGOs, although planning was still viewed as a critical prerequisite for evaluation, the new structures sought to shift emphasis towards evaluations and a results-oriented management system. Both were also introducing 'performance measurement systems' as a means of generating more information on impact. Indeed, there was

a great deal of emphasis on impact assessment. In the case of CARE International, for example, the M&E system instituted in 1994 was comprised of 'organisational and sectoral objectives, with corresponding generic indicators, against which country and regional offices could report annually' (CARE International 1997, internal document).⁶ By its very nature, therefore, this system did not include other context-specific indicators that might have been more appropriate to the information needs of the project community, i.e. managers, partners, and the local community. Indeed, fewer than half the INGOs in the study permitted field programmes to design locally appropriate M&E systems that were consistent with internal guidelines and procedures.

INGO policies on how to use information and feedback mechanisms

All INGO policy documents placed great importance on being able to obtain continuous feedback on information generated by their M&E systems. ActionAid provides a good case in point:

Feedback is critically important if monitoring and evaluation is to have any meaning, and to be of any use to the organisation. Without feedback, we have just a reporting system and data gathering and forwarding is just an activity like other activities.

(ActionAid 1995, internal document)

Most organisations further advocated that, whenever possible, the findings generated through M&E activities should be made available to all stakeholders, and that an efficient feedback system was a means through which INGOs could review M&E systems, thereby '... improving the quality of information generated as well as revising programme design, development and implementation' (ACORD 1997, internal document). Much greater clarity was needed, however, on key issues such as: Who needs what information? How often? In what form? While at least three policy documents identified 'feedback of M&E findings to the community' as a particularly weak link in the M&E chain, there was minimal discussion about how it could be improved, or what actions may result.

INGO policies on the participation of local actors in M&E

With one exception, all INGO policy documents explicitly expressed the need for some form of local participation within M&E procedures. A frequently unresolved issue, however, was the *nature* of the role that

local people could or should play. While most INGOs required them 'to be involved in all M&E activities', only a third specified the precise form this should take, and the significance that would be attributed to their views. In fact, only one INGO considered that M&E activities should exclusively be the domain of local participants (including drawing up Terms of Reference). Far more common were obscure statements, which held that the various stakeholder agendas should be addressed in different ways using a variety of methods, as illustrated below:

A participatory approach can be used to some extent in most types of evaluation. Indeed, all methods and approaches should be designed to make sure the perspectives of different groups including women and children are taken into account.

(SCF 1996, internal document)

In summary, therefore, we observe that few of the INGOs sampled had separate policy documents on M&E and that fewer still had clear policies outlining how to prepare, implement, and follow up M&E procedures. The lack of sound M&E policies to which staff can refer could, therefore, mean that policy implementation effectively depends to some extent on processes of negotiation between managers and field staff. However, neither group is likely to comply with policy expectations if they neither know nor understand them. We shall therefore turn to an analysis of how various aspects of M&E are perceived and practised by different INGO actors.

INGO perceptions of M&E

When assessing perceptions of M&E at different organisational levels, the most obvious point is that 'monitoring' and 'evaluation' were frequently employed by respondents in a way that reflected the discussion of such terms within the policy documents of their respective organisations. For instance, in INGOs whose documentation failed to make a conceptual distinction between the terms, respondents were far more likely to pick up on the ambiguity and to use the terms interchangeably. What is more, it became apparent that previous experiences with M&E activities significantly framed people's perceptions concerning these processes. As these experiences were in turn determined by the hierarchical positioning of respondents within their organisation, perceptions of M&E tended to vary accordingly. This hierarchical variation is discussed in a little more depth below.

Perceptions of M&E at head office

Generally, staff at head office were greatly in favour of M&E goals and objectives. They perceived such activities to be one of the most important stages of the project cycle (if not the most important) and generally associated it with the notion of strengthening and sustaining institutional development. A typical comment here was that 'M&E is an internal tool for improving standards and strengthening practices, and as such, it is an increasingly essential component of the project cycle.'

Moreover, these respondents generally favoured the increased prominence of M&E and acknowledged the enormous potential benefits for strengthening institutional learning. However, a significant number also voiced concerns regarding the validity or reliability of M&E findings at the project level, as illustrated by the comment that 'M&E offers considerable scope for institutional learning but it is weakened by the fact that the information generated can be readily abused by those who may feel threatened by it.' Field-level M&E may be an important means of improving our learning but only if we can ensure that the data generated accurately reflect the situation on the ground.

On further questioning, respondents went on to discuss the influence which donors traditionally have over the M&E process and the potential constraints on the flow of reliable data imposed by their financing structures:

Donors are in the strongest position to encourage the flow of reliable information from the INGOs they finance, but 'negative information' is still unlikely to appear in INGO reports unless staff are confident that such information cannot jeopardise future funding.

Perceptions of M&E in offices in Addis Ababa

Although Addis officials were rarely as enthusiastic about M&E and their respective functions as their counterparts at head office, they were generally in agreement with the need to assess their activities at some level. However, for many such respondents, an implicit acceptance of the necessity for M&E failed to mask their concerns that such processes were primarily being used as instruments of 'control' and 'judgement' against them. Although internal evaluations were generally tolerated, external evaluations were perceived to constitute significant threats to job security, as the following quotes illustrate:

They [external evaluation teams] come here for a week or so, speak to us as if they are our friends and are genuinely concerned about our daily struggles, then they go back and write terrible things about us ... making us seem incompetent ... it's not a fair system!

We have two types of external evaluations – intermediate independent evaluations which are carried out twice yearly by partners [local government] and end of term evaluations carried out by donors. Both give us headaches!

These statements allow a glimpse of the level of powerlessness felt by Addis staff at being unable to influence the outcome of M&E activities, and the weight of perceived pressure to produce 'the required results'. Indeed, in certain INGOs the notion of job security was strongly, albeit indirectly, linked to the outcome of M&E processes and thus was obviously a real issue for such staff. In addition to raising critical questions about the ownership and control of information generated by M&E systems, the prevalence of such perceptions also highlights an obvious weakness in the structure and design of current M&E frameworks.

Perceptions of M&E in field offices

The impact of the position of staff within the institutional hierarchy on their perceptions of M&E was particularly evident in discussions with INGO field staff – both senior (project and sector managers) and junior (development agents, village motivators, etc.). While the discourse of senior staff revealed a frequent association of 'monitoring' with 'financial assessment' and 'accountability', junior staff tended to associate such procedures with notions of 'external measurement' and 'judgement'. It was quite revealing that junior staff were responsible for undertaking daily reporting and monitoring activities (i.e. filling in 'daily report formats' and 'field diaries') yet not one respondent thought to include these activities in their descriptions of what the 'monitoring' process entails. Rather, such reporting systems were primarily viewed as instruments through which senior managers could assess the progress of junior staff, as the following comment illustrates:

... once in two days – sometimes every day – I fill in this report and give it to the [sector] manager at the end of the week, then every month or so we meet and review what I have written and he assesses it and helps me understand what I have done wrong in my job ...

Clearly, staff at this level perceived M&E procedures as a highly sophisticated and technical set of activities from which they were excluded by virtue of their inferior position. One respondent effectively summarised this perspective when he stated:

We still tend to think of M&E as a set of complex and specialised procedures that are beyond our understanding and to tell the truth, beyond our duties within this organisation.

The idea that frontline staff could get involved in the design and planning of M&E systems (as suggested by the researcher) was generally met with some degree of consternation. It thus came as no surprise to learn that such activities held little interest for junior field staff and so were undertaken without much enthusiasm. It later emerged that such widespread feelings of 'detachment' at this level had been further exacerbated by the staff not knowing the purpose of the information collated and its potential relevance for them as frontline actors. The following quotation is a good example:

We collect most of the data necessary but we don't see where or how it is used ... we write reports, collect them, and pass them on to the sector manager who writes more reports and sends them off – we don't learn anything from this process, then the whole thing starts again!

Indeed, failure to feed back relevant information to frontline staff appears to have led to a general confusion regarding the end use of collated data. Feelings of disengagement from the M&E process were by no means exclusive to junior staff. Some senior field staff also perceived the M&E process to be 'too technical' and 'too formal', in addition to being undertaken largely for the benefit of partners and donors, as expressed below:

For those of us who work directly with communities, information from M&E could be used to correct our mistakes and improve practice, but in reality it is carried out for the benefit of our donors and partners, not ourselves.

Such feelings of exclusion were observed first-hand in three scheduled interviews with senior field staff during which the researcher arrived only to discover an 'M&E designate' present in addition to (or in place of) the expected interviewee. Senior staff generally felt ill-equipped to discuss M&E-related issues and therefore occasionally desired the presence of a well-informed respondent to deal with potentially 'problematic questions':

When you asked to meet me, I went around the office and they told me you asked a lot of questions about M&E. This is really not my field. I didn't want to waste your time so I asked X [M&E officer] to join us and help me out.

Such incidents reveal that the 'M&E arena' was not one in which field staff felt empowered. Indeed, our findings confirm that openness and trust are prerequisites for the meaningful practice of M&E. Regardless of their place in the hierarchy, staff need a 'safe' space in which to articulate their views and concerns. This in turn calls for greater trust between donors, managers, and operational staff. But, as Gaventa and Blauert (2000:239) point out, 'trust requires more than "permission" to give voice to opinions'. Indeed, it requires honest self-evaluation and transparency about failures and successes at every level.

Variations in perceived functions of M&E within INGOs

Despite the limited familiarity of some actors with M&E processes, the study found that approval was heavily biased in favour of monitoring as opposed to evaluation by staff at all organisational levels. The general feeling was that the lessons offered by evaluations were produced, in the words of one senior field official, 'too late to be of use to staff and to make a difference to the quality of work being implemented'. Further questioning on the perceived functions of M&E revealed a distinct pattern of responses as illustrated for INGO A in Table 1.

While most head office respondents emphasised the role that M&E plays in relation to enhancing institutional learning and accountability to donors, country- and field-level staff generally stressed its role as a means of improving internal practice and upwards accountability. At field-office levels, the stress was primarily on the role M&E plays in satisfying the bureaucratic demands of higher-level offices and in facilitating the identification of anomalies within projects. Such findings are not altogether surprising considering that UK offices operate relatively autonomously of the administrative boundaries of

Table 1: Different views on M&E among staff in INGO A		
INGO A–UK Office	INGO A–Country Office (Addis Ababa)	INGO A–Field Office
M&E contributes to the learning process within the INGO and if done correctly can also empower those who participate in it.	M&E is [a] useful tool for improving internal standards and [is] the means through which we continue to receive funding.	[M&E] keeps those above us happy and allows the project to get feedback on its overall performance.

field projects, while those in the field are 'closest to the firing-line' and thus are responsible for presenting the project as a successful and viable package to the rest of the organisation.

It was also observed, however, that perceptions of M&E functions are also occasionally framed by more socio-psychological motives, as illustrated below:

When outside officials visit the various project sites, M&E work helps us to be able to tell them about improvements in repayment rates of microcredit programmes, improvements in numbers attending adult education classes, etc. It makes us look better informed so they will give us more respect.

(INGO country staff)

If we know or understand what the local people feel about the project and how they want to be involved in it, we become stronger and we can represent their views better to the INGO.

(INGO field staff)

The first respondent highlights the importance of 'good' self-image and being able to present the 'right' image to outsiders. The second emphasises the importance of accurately portraying grassroots information as a means of better representing local views. Both statements, however, implicitly acknowledge the potentially empowering nature of the M&E process, i.e. how it can locate staff in positions of authority and provide a broader base of legitimacy for their viewpoints. Frontline staff, in particular, tended to view the M&E process not only as a means of increasing their legitimacy within the INGO, but also as a means of securing a greater degree of acceptance from the local communities with which they worked. As the next quote illustrates, frontline respondents explained how the monitoring-type activities they performed frequently acted as a barrier against potential hostility from local people:

It is very difficult for me as a woman coming into this new environment.

My mother is from this region and although I'm familiar with the customs I have never lived here. People tend to be rude to newcomers, especially female ones ... It is up to you to win their acceptance. It isn't always easy but I find that when I have a clipboard in my hands and I'm asking questions as a member of staff they respect me more and answer me in a polite voice.

Such statements remind us that frontline staff can encounter considerable resistance, and frequently struggle to define their role within host communities. The fact that many such staff live in the

same villages in which they work and emulate the lifestyles of local inhabitants can serve to lower their perceived status as INGO staff. These workers thus come under pressure to re-establish their social status and employ various strategies to do this, including undertaking simple monitoring procedures. Hence, the motives for undertaking M&E-related activities may comprise more than the need simply to follow INGO directives in a straightforward implementation of policy.

INGO practice of M&E

In the previous section we explored the nature of M&E policies and how staff perceived these processes and their related functions (i.e. why M&E is undertaken). We now examine how such policies and perceptions translate into practice (i.e. what methods are used on the ground and who owns the results of M&E activities). Issues relating to practice are divided into three distinct categories which address (a) types of methodological approaches used by INGOs, (b) the formulation of indicators and selection procedures, and (c) information needs and feedback mechanisms.

Methodological tools and approaches to M&E

INGOs currently use three different kinds of M&E approach. These can be categorised broadly as participatory M&E, which is mainly carried out by those directly involved in project implementation; non-participatory M&E, in which the evaluation is conducted by external evaluators; and joint evaluation where it is conducted by a team including people from outside and inside the programme.⁷ The latter two predominate among the INGOs studied, and it was apparent that many attempts were being made to develop and employ alternative and more participatory approaches to M&E. Numerous interviews (especially, but not exclusively, at UK offices) revealed a fundamental dissatisfaction with the 'dominant M&E paradigm' in which M&E is mostly perceived as a narrow, donor-initiated external activity focusing primarily on 'upwards' accountability and quantifiable achievement. As the quotes below illustrate, at the time of the study several INGOs were attempting to broaden definitions of M&E by increasing the number of stakeholders involved in the process:

As much as possible we are trying hard to encourage the use of more participatory techniques into all forms of M&E undertaken in this organisation.

(Senior UK official)

Table 2: Methods, tools, and techniques used in six INGO M&E procedures

INGO A	INGO B	INGO C	INGO D	INGO E	INGO F
Formal surveys, cost-benefit analysis, PAR and PRA, and case-study reports.	Mainly PRA tools and semi-structured interviews.	Participatory M&E methods, informal techniques.	Logical Framework, questionnaire, structured interviews, and focus-group discussions.	Logical Framework, questionnaire, and surveys.	Focus groups, PRA, and semi-structured interviews.

As an organisation we have found that formal tools such as surveys have pre-determined questions that don't allow for flexibility, are very extractive giving little in return, produce very poor quality data, and are non-participatory. Therefore, we now advocate the use of more participatory tools like PRA, PAR, and other variations on the theme.

(UK M&E officer)

Although a small but determined cluster of two INGOs remained suspicious of so-called 'alternative methods' and continued to justify the use of more orthodox approaches, in the main, INGOs appeared to have embraced the use of more participatory approaches in M&E, as evidenced in Table 2.

It was also observed that the type of M&E being undertaken had an influence on the methods employed. End-of-term and mid-term evaluations, for instance, tended to be undertaken by outside consultants whose operational parameters were frequently defined by Logical Framework Analysis (LogFrame). Reports were subsequently written from the perspective of donors and their information needs. On the other hand, internal monitoring processes were undertaken more frequently and thus considered to be better suited to the use of PRA tools. The findings would then be documented with the intention of feeding back to those directly involved in the project and as such were viewed more favourably by field staff: 'Many of our staff believe that ongoing monitoring with local partners and beneficiaries could be more useful and important for the development of the project than external evaluations.'

However, it was readily apparent that certain contradictions exist in the selection of methods for use in M&E. First, there were contradictions between the desire of field offices to achieve their own specific objectives and the obligatory use of rational management tools imposed upon them from above: 'Our donors strongly favour the LFA

mode of management but our staff find it really onerous so we are in a real dilemma ... we are under pressure to conform to all their paradigms and expectations', said one UK official.

Similarly, the obligatory use of LFA tools posed real problems for field offices trying accurately to relay local views to donors. The following statement highlights the inherent dissension that plague staff during M&E reporting:

DfID funding reports place a heavy emphasis on the use of LFA, but we find it very difficult translating the information given to us by beneficiaries on the ground into 'DfID language' ... DfIDs' list of objectives/goals/indicators and the objectives/goals/indicators that are appropriate for our partners and the community do not match.

(Addis official)

Finally, contradictions were also apparent between the desire of INGO offices to be both more accountable to donors and to strengthen organisational learning processes:

We've found that there are potential conflicts in attempting to be more accountable to donors and using M&E for improving our learning as we would wish ... We haven't yet found the right balance between the two in our activities.

Plainly, the mechanical use of M&E systems was limiting organisational learning to immediate project outputs (e.g. progress, results, efficiency, etc. as defined by the indicators) rather than extending it to issues of power and power relationships within the project community. As such, there was a need for a radical rethinking about who initiates and undertakes the process, and who learns and benefits from its findings.

Selection of indicators and information needs

The process of selecting appropriate indicators for use in M&E systems is one that highlights, perhaps more accurately than any other, the need to acknowledge the existence of differing stakeholder information needs and multiple perspectives of reality within project interventions. Ricafort (1996) points out that this process is one that requires careful examination.

A review of INGO documentation revealed that the selection of indicators occurs in various ways within different INGOs. In the more devolved or decentralised INGOs, for example, appropriate process indicators were decided upon mostly at project or sectoral levels. However, this could be problematic:

Each project has to select or design indicators which they believe to be specific to their problems and environment ... This could mean that two separate projects either side of the same mountain have completely different sets of objectives and indicators. This makes it very difficult to establish a central reporting system but what's the alternative?

Impact indicators were generally decided upon at national or HQ levels. In the more centralised INGOs, however, field staff were required to use externally pre-designed and pre-selected indicators, which meant that there was frequently little or no consideration of the experiences, views, and opinions of field staff within this process:

Indicators are selected en masse by a group of NGOs who also have projects that are funded by the same body. Projects are then issued with a checklist of indicators categorised by sector, and managers are expected to use only those indicators that are relevant to them.

Quantitative indicators were greatly favoured by INGOs regardless of the organisational level at which they were formulated. Although the choice of either quantitative or qualitative indicators was dependent on the objectives of the M&E process and the information required by the various stakeholders, interviews revealed the prevalence of, and preference for, the use of pre-defined quantitative indicators. One HQ official rationalised his organisation's decision to maintain this traditional approach as follows:

Staff are a lot more comfortable with using quantitative indicators to measure activities because they're much easier to conceptualise and therefore, more useful as a whole. Qualitative methods and indicators tend to require a lot of work and are more time-consuming than we can afford.

Even when monitoring long-term social development objectives, most INGO staff indicated a preference for quantitative indicators as being 'less difficult to define'. Indeed, 75 per cent of all respondents felt that such indicators – if carefully identified and selected – could be effectively employed to assess even *qualitative* changes. Moreover, despite rhetorical evidence to the contrary,⁸ respondents readily acknowledged that the widespread use of qualitative and/or grassroots indicators is a long way from being realised:

Indicators have so far been designed using our perceptions of what participation is and how much of it we require. We have to learn to develop 'negotiated indicators' that allow for the perceptions of beneficiaries to be taken into consideration. We are still some way off ...

In reality, then, the process of selecting indicators was undertaken with a considerable degree of rigidity, conformity, and fear of innovation.

Lower down in the organisational hierarchy, moreover, the researcher was somewhat surprised to discover that junior field staff would occasionally 'collude' with local people in the task of identifying 'appropriate' monitoring indicators in order to present an image of 'project success', 'approval of project activities' and/or 'effective local participation' to Addis officials and external evaluators. The following extract from the researcher's own diary, drawing on highlights from an informal discussion with a group of village health workers (VHWs) and traditional birth assistants (TBAs) in western Ethiopia, illustrates this point:

27 January 1998

Over the year, there had been ad hoc attempts to assess the level of beneficiary involvement in the health sector. Although never undertaken in any systematic way, local actors such as TBAs and VHWs were encouraged to get involved and to develop what they considered to be appropriate indicators for measuring local participation. The results of this effort, however, were, in the words of one sector manager, 'highly unsatisfactory'. Senior field staff complained that the (mostly) qualitative indicators that had been selected by local actors were 'too subjective', 'very open to abuse', and could ultimately present the 'new health facilities in a poor light'. A meeting was called and senior officials explained to local actors that if such indicators were used, they would 'show the health facilities to be offering a poor service and funding would eventually be withdrawn'. VHWs even claimed that these officials had reprimanded them for using 'the wrong definitions of participation'. Terrified of losing their newly acquired health facilities and hard-earned social status with the community as a result, VHWs and TBAs agreed to use another list of impact indicators that had previously been approved by senior field staff.

This diary entry illustrates how fear of reprisals, possible loss of status in the community, and the pressure to appear successful encouraged field staff and local people to 'collude' in misrepresenting information about the quality of health facilities offered by the programme. If we assume that the M&E process (including the selection of indicators) exists to fulfil the information demands of a range of actors in the project community, then the above extract highlights the need to revise our assumptions and carefully examine what these information needs actually are.

The information needs and expectations of different INGO actors

In-depth discussion with INGO actors revealed that M&E processes were expected to fulfil four broad categories of ‘information needs’, which directly corresponded to the position of staff within the hierarchy. HQ staff, for example, expressed a particular preference for information that would demonstrate the comprehension and/or acceptance of project aims by local people and thus gain donor approval (i.e. the sustainability of project activities). As such, the information generated was expected to provide answers primarily to subjective questions such as, ‘Do local people accept what we are doing? ... Are they doing it because we are pushing them or because they feel it is genuinely important for them?’

On the other hand, both country- and senior-level field staff appeared to be more concerned with collating data on the progress being made in relation to their goals, and the extent to which this progress may or may not meet donor expectations: ‘We need to know what major mistakes we’ve made for which we can be criticised by donors such as why local people are not getting involved in certain activities as anticipated’.

Indeed, there was evidence to suggest that country staff occasionally ‘colluded’ with those in HQ to present a particular image or relay a specific message to donors:

Often the pressures from donors were so great – at least in terms of timing – that field staff were sometimes unable to finish off their quarterly or half-yearly reports. These reports would end up on my desk and often I would have to somehow beef them up and complete them. (M&E officer)

Field staff – in particular frontline staff – however, appeared to be less concerned with meeting the expectations of donors, and were anxious for the information generated by M&E systems to indicate to them how local people had responded to their own personal interventions within the project context. One such incident was recounted to me by a senior water manager based in eastern Ethiopia:

The success of the water sector in Jijiga depends very much on the community’s capacity to manage and maintain their scarce water resources. Traditionally in Somali culture, water points are privately owned, but we wanted to implement community shared water points, so we weren’t exactly sure how well this would be accepted. Anyway, we started the project but we were worried about its sustainability and the possible waste of our resources. Then without notifying us the junior water manager

designed his own monitoring procedure and carried out regular assessments. He assessed the various community management mechanisms, i.e. who and what member of the community was responsible for fencing, for electing water point guards, and for financing the water points. This continued over a period of a few months and was very useful to us in explaining how the community perceived water projects and whether or not they could be sustainable.

Although later discussions with the junior staff member in question revealed marked differences between the ‘perceived’ and ‘real’ intentions underlying his regular assessment of the water sector, this case was an excellent illustration of how field staff can, and frequently do, exercise unsanctioned discretion to promote their own interests within the confines of the INGO policy framework. Thus, the underlying message behind this (and many similar findings not addressed here) is that the capacity for innovative thinking which exists within INGOs, especially at the lower levels, needs to be further explored. Indeed, INGOs would do well to adopt an interactive approach to M&E that enables them to listen to, and learn from, even the most junior of actors.

However, the identification of varying information needs without sufficient feedback into development processes simply ensures that the M&E process becomes an end in itself, rather than a means through which improvements can be made (Abbot and Guijt 1997:44). Thus, we now turn our attention to M&E feedback mechanisms within INGOs.

Use of feedback mechanisms in M&E

Discussions with INGO staff revealed an overall awareness of the importance of efficient feedback mechanisms and significant consensus on the general inadequacy of existing systems. However, complaints were especially common at field levels, as junior staff often lamented the lack of adequate supervision and feedback on their activities by their seniors. For example, in two INGOs, junior staff (e.g. community workers and village promoters) were given ‘field diaries’ in which they had to report their daily activities as part of an internal day-to-day monitoring system. These diaries revealed a ‘blow-by-blow’ account of project activities as they unfolded and provided potentially valuable opportunities to study changes throughout the course of an intervention (Jackson 1997). However, respondents said that such diaries were almost never read or reviewed by sector managers (or

above). Neither was there any significant discussion with, or feedback to, the staff member about the contents of their diary. Consequently, junior staff were beginning to lose the motivation to keep such diaries:

I was told to report my activities to this diary every day and I have tried to do so but no one has asked to see it yet ... I'm still waiting to be asked about it ... I'm not sure if what I have written is relevant any longer ... or if I should continue ...

When questioned about this, the senior managers interviewed generally attributed the neglect of such duties to the sheer volume of data generated by such monitoring systems and the subsequent shortage of time:

Often the frequent nature of the reporting system we use results in a colossal amount of data being gathered. Our time is very restricted ... We haven't got time to read these diaries. Anyway, much of the information in them is quite personal and not very useful ... staff don't always focus on recording the type of hard data that I need to compile my own reports.

In turn, senior field staff complained bitterly about the inadequate feedback they received on their reports from support offices in Addis, local government offices, and donors. Focus-group discussions held with senior field staff in four INGOs identified five common limitations in organisational M&E feedback systems:

- irregularity and inconsistency of feedback;
- lack of clarity on roles and authority;
- lack of motivation from sector managers;
- lack of intra- and inter-sectoral information sharing;
- lack of field-visit reports from HQ and programme managers.

Thus far, we have discussed the issue of feedback to INGO staff. However, if INGOs are serious about handing over the control of development interventions to local people, then they must be the central focus of all programmes and systems. The M&E system is no exception and must be centred around the needs, perceptions, and values of the affected community so that locally generated information filters up through the ranks of the organisation and leads to improved learning. With the exception of two INGOs, relaying information back to the local community was generally 'not viewed as an essential activity'.

In these two INGOs, however, feedback from M&E activities was relayed to local people through a combination of both formal and

informal channels. The formal route included oral presentations by staff in regular community meetings, committee-group discussions, meetings with peasant-association members, and so on. Traditional or informal communication channels such as *ider*, *debo*,⁹ and religious gatherings were then also employed to convey interesting or pertinent findings to the wider localities. The following statement by a farmer in the Meket province of northern Ethiopia demonstrates the potential value of such informal channels:

In the previous Government extension package, a quota system was in place that meant farmers were only entitled to receive food aid from the Government [during food shortage periods] if we agreed to produce a certain amount of crops of a certain variety each season. Those who were unable to comply with this quota were forced to sell their animals during the lean periods, which was disastrous. The seeds promoted in the extension package had not been properly investigated but we were forced to use them without even having been included in the selection or planning process. Now that SOS-Sahel has introduced this new extension package, PADET, we are determined not to be left out a second time! Now we meet regularly and discuss the progress of the new seeds and decide for ourselves if they are appropriate. Any new farming techniques that we are taught by the DAs who work with us are passed on to neighbouring farmers. We also discuss about the coping strategies we may use if our crops fail because finally, we can only rely on ourselves.

So, while feeding information ‘upwards’ from the local level poses one set of challenges for INGOs, the above extract reaffirms the need for effective ‘downwards’ communication. Significant numbers of both field staff and local people indicated that they had very little idea why they were being consulted, or even about the purpose of M&E exercises. Moreover, they were rarely informed of the outcome of higher-level decisions that were subsequently taken. Without this knowledge, it was difficult for them to offer a considered view or to become fully engaged in the process. This may in turn explain the feelings of alienation from the whole M&E process experienced by such actors: failure to promote both ‘upwards’ and ‘downwards’ accountability is thus a serious flaw that hinders the potential for learning within INGOs.

Analysis of findings

In his study of government bureaucracies, Wilson (1989:39) claims that a well-defined and widely understood sense of purpose can lead to better internalisation of an organisation’s goals by its employees. If we concede

this point, it follows that lack of conceptual clarity and the general blurring of functional distinctions evidenced in some M&E policy documents, coupled with the complex and hierarchical nature of many M&E frameworks, will hinder the internalisation of M&E objectives by INGOs. In fact, while staff generally recognised the potential value of M&E, it was clear from our study that country and field staff in particular were unable to define their roles within such frameworks. This confusion indicates the need for an office-wide clarification of these concepts if M&E policy is to be implemented effectively.

We also observed the significant impact of the hierarchical positioning of INGO staff on their perceptions of M&E. Those furthest removed from practice tended to embrace a more analytical approach focusing on the potential for M&E to feed into organisational learning, while those closest to the ground emphasised 'upwards accountability' and therefore associated such activities with 'judgement', 'control', and 'external supervision'. Significant numbers of field staff were observed to feel rather disengaged from M&E activities, viewing them as complex, specialised, and hence exclusive procedures. How did these perceptions affect the actual practice of M&E?

If our discussion of M&E practice is analysed with an emphasis on organisational-structural factors, then we note that the current structures of many M&E systems constitute a major constraint on the effective implementation of policy directives. Such constraints include the predetermined nature of M&E methods and indicators; the obvious preference of donors and head offices for quantitative indicators and data; the lack of adequate supervision and training; the absence of effective feedback mechanisms; and the failure of M&E systems to provide relevant and timely information to the various actors.

Although an understanding of these structural factors constitutes an essential dimension to explaining M&E practice, the conditioning influence of this structure can only occur through interaction with the knowledge and capability of staff, i.e. staff 'agency'. Thus, while it may be critical, such a narrow organisational-structural perspective does not adequately explain practice. Indeed, conflicting perceptions of M&E activities (even within the same INGO) indicate that its practice is not simply the execution of an already specified plan of action but is rather 'an ongoing, socially constructed and negotiated process' (Long 1990:6). Focusing on the perspectives of different actors in the M&E system effectively draws attention to the fact that whatever the initial plans, when M&E systems are built into a project, they are likely to be

framed and transformed by the strategies (based on their perceptions and interests) of these different actors.

We have already indicated the extent to which both country and field staff associated the M&E process with 'judgement', 'control', and 'job insecurity'. However, we also detected evidence of 'collusion' between both sets of actors (and local people) in the process of reporting their efforts 'upwards'. Such events illustrate that staff are not passive recipients of INGO interventions and are capable of employing unsanctioned discretion in seeking to promote their own interests within the confines of the policy framework. Similarly, junior staff proved capable of some clever manoeuvring in their attempts to generate information or data that were outside the formal demands of the M&E process and thereby improve their performance.

Conclusion

Three key lessons emerge from this study. First, M&E and its various functions are perceived in very different ways, emphasising particular aspects of the process in accordance with the functional interests and past experiences of those involved. As such, there is evidently a disturbing gap between how head office and other INGO staff perceive the key functions of M&E. This highlights the importance of intra-organisational communication about the objectives of the M&E process.

Second, we learned that efforts to modify M&E systems appear to be taking place within INGOs without sufficient thought as to how information thus generated can be used to fulfil the demands of key project actors (e.g. field staff and local people) and thereby strengthen institutional learning. It is probable that this 'information gap' could have contributed significantly to the lack of interest in M&E activities exhibited by INGO staff at the 'lower end' of the organisational hierarchy.

Lastly, we learnt that M&E practice at the various organisational levels is generally undertaken in an atmosphere of uncertainty and tension, such that M&E reporting can sometimes involve staff 'framing a story' that adheres more closely to donor guidelines than to reality (Craig and Porter 1997). Thus, there is a clear argument for increased rigour at the project level and the creation of an empowering organisational culture on a broader scale. As an ActionAid Strategy Paper acknowledged, however, this is not something at which INGOs have traditionally excelled:

While most INGOs have written about empowerment in their literature, most staff within them have suffered from centralist attitudes and disempowering restructuring processes and language from HQ.
(ActionAid 1999-2003:21, internal document)

Unfortunately, failure to empower staff has resulted in narrowing opportunities for them to participate in critical decisions. As such, INGOs have thus far failed the challenge of the 1990s which, according to Cornwall (2000:41), was 'to lever open spaces for participation'.

Such a finding does not bode well for INGOs currently attempting to scale up the impact of their interventions and carve out a space for themselves in an increasingly competitive environment. There is a clear need for organisational change with regards to M&E practice. But, as the case of ActionAid illustrates, INGOs striving to institute such changes may face many severe challenges.

ActionAid has now joined the ranks of INGOs in attempting to modify its M&E system by instituting the principles of participation and 'downwards' accountability. This entails rewriting the planning and reporting system – recently renamed 'Accountability Learning and Planning System' or ALPS (David and Owusa 2000; Scott-Villiers in this volume). As these changes take place, however, there should be awareness that they bring with them a degree of instability. Staff are likely to find it difficult to accomplish their new job specifications as familiar lines of communication disappear. Indeed, they are likely to feel unsure of what is expected of them and what they must do to fulfil the new mandates. Although the new policies may be clearly stated, the actual conditions may appear quite different from the ideals expressed. Consequently, it is possible that staff will begin to long for continuity, and eventually this may become a dominant tension. Fritz (1994:27) warns that it is frequently at this point in the 'change cycle' that an organisation is likely to return to 'business as usual' and the change effort will be recognised as a failure. It is therefore essential that managers anticipate this resistance and create the space necessary for staff to find their own entry points into the new system.

Notes

1 Evidence of this concern can be gathered from the 'INGO, states and donors' overview in Hulme and Edwards (1997:7–10).

2 These include ActionAid, ACORD, CARE International, Oxfam GB, Plan International, SCF, SOS-Sahel, and Tear Fund.

- 3 The term 'orthodox' refers to M&E approaches that are oriented solely to the needs of funding agencies and policy makers. Many argue that such approaches produce information that is 'objective', 'value-free', and 'quantifiable', and hence outsiders are normally contracted to undertake them (Estrella *et al.* 2000:3).
- 4 While field offices tended to handle project evaluations locally, head offices were involved in broader programme and country evaluations.
- 5 ActionAid has since joined these ranks with the establishment of ALPS in 1998.
- 6 Generic indicators act as common currency across programmes world-wide and are later passed up the system and aggregated. Methods for identifying such indicators differ between agencies. In CARE, key indicators were established based on best practice within sectors and through consultations with professional and technical staff in regional offices and HQ.
- 7 Internal evaluations or self-assessments are also carried out by local organisations, but these are not always categorised as evaluations since they may not always result in written products. The final production of an 'evaluation report' complies with traditional expectations of M&E.
- 8 For example, CARE experimented with the use of qualitative indicators in the reproductive health sector.
- 9 Traditional self-help institutions (e.g. *ider, iquib, debo*) have existed in Ethiopia for as long as can be recalled, and they continue to play an important role in the life of ordinary Ethiopians. Some have been registered as 'neighbourhood associations' since the 1960s and, although little written documentation exists about such systems, these are considered to be the forerunners of what are currently labelled local organisations or CBOs.

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