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Department:
SA Management Development Institute
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Monitoring and Evaluation

Report on Provincial Focus Groups

Participating Provinces
Free State
Limpopo
Eastern Cape
Western Cape
Northern Cape
Kwazulu Natal

Introduction

Four provincial focus groups were held, one at each of the above provinces, each lasting approximately two hours. The number of people attending the focus groups varied by province, from a minimum of six in one province to a maximum of over twenty in another. The provincial departments represented in the focus groups varied from province to province, but overall, the spread covered most of the service departments functioning at the provincial level.

To make the arrangements in each province for these groups, the person in the office of the premier responsible for monitoring and evaluation was contacted. This office then made the necessary arrangements for the venues and times for the groups to be held. The groups were led by Dr Ros Hirschowitz, an independent consultant for SAMDI, and observed by Marisa Labuschagne, a SAMDI staff member. There were two additional observers in Limpopo Province. The proceedings were both minuted and recorded, but the groups did not take place behind one-way viewing facilities as is customary for these types of sessions, since the discussion was not focused on sensitive personal issues. The composition of the groups varied by: type of department within the province, level of appointment of the participant, and their race and sex. This made for interesting and lively discussions.

Comparison with focus groups at national level

When compared to the focus groups run for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practitioners at national level, there were many similarities in terms of the understanding of what constitutes M&E, but there were some differences, as highlighted in the discussion below. But what was most noticeable was the unevenness of the application of M&E principles in different provinces, and the emphasis placed on different aspects of the process within them. For example, in one province, emphasis was placed on using data, including data collection and the use of existing data bases in government, whereas in another province, the main focus was on financial aspects of M&E, namely watching expenditure.

Definitions of monitoring and evaluation

There was not always a shared understanding of the definition of evaluation. For example, in one province, the question was posed regarding whether there were differences between performance evaluation and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in general.

Monitoring was generally seen as a continuous process to track the progress of services, projects and programmes, and their modification if necessary. In general, evaluation was seen as a more periodic activity, with a focus on the assessment of results or interim results, leading to improvements in future planning and implementation. Stress was placed on impact assessment as a requirement. At present provinces report on inputs, expenditure and activities, and sometimes outputs, but they do not necessarily report on the impact of these activities on the communities they are serving.

Monitoring was generally regarded as being easier to do than evaluation. In one province, the opinion was expressed that the people had not moved beyond monitoring towards actually evaluating the work. In another province, evaluation as done at present was seen as completing monthly, quarterly and annual progress reports for national government. Evaluation was also seen by some respondents as involving the making of judgements about whether or not the goals of a particular intervention had been met.

This difference in the way in which M&E is viewed in the provinces points to a need to start at introductory levels in capacity building, not only for M&E practitioners, but also for those in management.

Levels, types and purposes of M&E

The different levels at which M&E could take place were not stressed equally in each of the four provinces. The strategy level was not mentioned as frequently as the implementation of services and projects level. In at least one province, the links between M&E and the planning cycle was not fully understood.

Regarding the type of M&E that should be practised in the provinces, in general, the groups agreed that M&E should be tailored to the level and purpose of the intervention. The basic idea was to evaluate whether specific goals had been attained in relation to indicators.

In general, the feeling was expressed that the approach of each province and in each department within the province to its work, influenced the type of M&E, its level and the way in which it was applied in that province or that specific provincial department. For example, in some provincial departments, it may be advisable to have an M&E component in each section, and then an integrating M&E component at a higher level to bring the various tasks of M&E together. In others, a separate M&E component could be sufficient.

The person in charge of M&E in the Office of the Premier in each province was seen as having a coordinating role, to bring M&E in line with both national and provincial requirements. This was particularly noticeable in the Western Cape, where emphasis was placed on being able to use existing data bases and existing Stats SA surveys.

The following concepts were seen in relative terms by the participants in the provincial focus group discussions: (a) inputs, (b) activities, (c) outputs, (d) outcomes and (e) impacts. What could be seen as an output for one department in a province could be seen as an input for another. For example, an output in education at a provincial level such as the pass rate could be seen as an input at national level for estimation of general pass rates throughout the country.

Capacity building in M&E should therefore make it clear how to differentiate between inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts for a specific purpose. It should also focus on practical situations in which these concepts can be applied.

Conceptual issues that were raised in relation to M&E

Throughout the provinces, there was some confusion regarding the meaning of the terms: (a) monitoring, (b) evaluation, (c) audits, (d) appraisals, (e) assessments, (f) quality assurance, (g) research and (h) reporting. This applied particularly when applying these terms in everyday practice. In common with national government departments, this ambiguity occurred particularly when there was role confusion; for example, if a different component within a department was responsible for appraisal, while another was responsible for research, and yet another for M&E.

The general feeling was that M&E contains all of the aspects mentioned above. Research components within a department, for example, should work together with M&E practitioners, and collect information for them. Some people saw the research function as being part of overall M&E, while others saw it as a separate function, and then others saw research as a tool to be used for M&E.

Capacity building should therefore focus on clear understandings of how different terms are applied in different situations in government, at both national and provincial levels. Practical exercises are essential to indicate the links between different processes, for example audits and evaluations.

Links between M&E and other functions in departments within provinces

The point was stressed in theory in all participating provinces that both monitoring and evaluation should be directly linked to all planning activities and to performance appraisal activities. But this was not necessarily presently happening. The general feeling was that managers do not always appreciate the value of M&E in the functions of appraisal and planning. It is presently not necessarily integrated into the different programmes and the planning cycles within government.

Cooperation across a department, and between the departments and the Office of the Premier, was considered to be essential to ensure that M&E can be implemented.

If the DG of a particular province sees M&E as a transversal system across all components of work, then it has a much better chance of succeeding. This led to the conclusion that one important aspect of capacity-building was ***advocacy***.

Capacity building was therefore considered important for all levels of management in the province, but particularly for senior management.

The structure of the M&E components within departments and within provinces

The way in which, and the levels at which, M&E components were structured differed across provinces, and from department to department within provinces. This lack of uniformity was singled out as a problem.

The one common feature was the hierarchical nature of the structure. This was the main difficulty for people in M&E components at a lower level than DDG, or sometimes Chief

Director, to form links with planning, performance appraisal, research, management information and other components that directly impact on the work of M&E.

Structures of M&E sections in departments may have implications for capacity-building, since the ability to apply what is learnt in M&E training in the work situation may be inhibited by lack of authority to implement such knowledge in practice.

Essential links to be made between M&E and other aspects of work

When discussing the type of competencies that M&E practitioners in government required in order to do their work efficiently and effectively, the ability to link the following aspects of work in general with the specific work of M&E practitioners were outlined:

- The ability to link M&E concepts with other concepts applicable to good governance within the province. For example, the ability to link M&E with organisational and individual performance and appraisal was emphasised. This type of link needs to happen from the level of Director General (DG) level or the head of a provincial department, cascading downwards, since the DG's or the head of the department's contract includes the goals of the department, on the basis of which indicators can be developed.
- The abilities to develop indicators based on the specific goals of each component of the department, and to develop indicators for the specific target groups for whom each goal is intended, were also stressed. This is particularly important for those provincial departments delivering services such as health, where epidemiological studies can be used as important M&E tools. For example, knowing the extent of immunisation coverage in a province can assist in developing a preventive health-care programme for infants and pre-school children.
- The ability to link M&E to all forms of reporting that is required by the provincial and national government, including financial reporting; annual reports; quarterly reports; and other types of reports was also discussed.
- The ability to link M&E with quality assurance and to use management information systems as part of monitoring progress of a project was also mentioned. The opinion was expressed that monitoring was similar to quality assurance, and the principles of quality assurance could equally apply to M&E.
- An essential linkage that was mentioned concerned provincial department-wide and specific planning in relation to M&E. Some participants stressed that plans and priorities should determine the type of baseline data to be collected or used for a specific intervention, and the actual process of collecting baseline data for that intervention. The initial plans and the baseline data should also link to the collection of data to estimate outcomes and impacts. Feedback from these M&E activities should then inform and influence improvements in future planning. However, very few departments in the provinces were actually carrying out this type of activity.

Thus capacity building should look at practical situations in which linkages can be made between outcomes and impacts and planning. For example, in health services, the impact

of education programmes on the possible reduction of the incidence of hypertension in a clinic could be examined. The type of education and the way in which it is delivered could then be included in the planning process of hypertension reduction in each clinic throughout a province.

Concerns that were raised in relation to effective M&E practice

The following concerns were raised in relation to the role that M&E practitioners are playing at the moment:

- At present, interventions are sometimes started without any situational analysis or even the collection of baseline data. M&E specialists are called in to evaluate the outcomes and impact of the intervention, without this type of background information.
- People work within specific boundaries without all the necessary expertise, and therefore are prone to making mistakes. For example, a health intervention can run into trouble because other aspects of affecting health, such as poor housing, are not necessarily considered in the planning process.
- An integrated approach in government is essential if M&E is to be successful. Often integration may take place at higher levels of government, for example at national level, but people in provinces and within departments in the provinces often feel that they work in isolation. Cross-sectoral committees are needed, even at lower levels of government, for M&E to be successful. The Western Cape has set an excellent example in this regard by starting an internal network for M&E practitioners, financial officers and other who need to exchange views and learn more about M&E.
- People tend to be very territorial and protective of their turf, hindering the effective practice of M&E especially when looking at outcomes and impact. Ways of sharing experiences across departments are required. Again, the example of the internal M&E network in the Western Cape is worth considering for using in all provinces and at national level, as a means of breaking down barriers and sharing experiences.
- It is difficult, as an M&E specialist, to attribute a specific outcome to a specific intervention, since many other factors come into play. For example, better health may be due to good rainfall for crop growing in a specific area of the country, and not to the supply of clean water. Yet this type of impact assessment seems to be what is expected from M&E specialists.
- The buy-in of politicians and managers is essential if M&E is to succeed in government.
- The quality of data was raised as a major concern. This applied particularly to self-reported data, where there were no validity checks.
- The monthly quarterly and annual reports were singled out as examples where it is difficult to ensure the accuracy of the reports. Standards are required for compiling these reports, and checking procedures should be introduced.
- Updating and maintenance of data sets, for example, the updating of PERSAL, and the way in which it is done was another concern raised.

Access to data sets

A very specific worry that the participants raised was the lack of access to data sets of other departments, including national and provincial departments, or even access to a data set within the particular department where they work, to enable M&E specialists to do their work effectively. For example, it is sometimes difficult for someone in a provincial education department to gain access to school data bases, and it is even more difficult to gain access to the data bases of provincial social welfare departments, and vice versa.

The suggestion was made that there should be a central repository where all data sets and other information is stored specifically for M&E practitioners.

Essential subject matter to be included in training

1. **Indicator development and measurement.** In common with national departments, provincial M&E specialists stressed that the training requirements for M&E should include not only how to measure existing indicators, but also how to develop new indicators relevant to a specific intervention. Training should include:
 - a. A shared understanding of the concept of indicators and what they are meant to measure;
 - b. How to develop different types of indicators, including: input, process, activity; output, outcome and impact indicators;
 - c. How to reduce a theoretical indicator into something that is observable and/or measurable; and
 - d. How to relate indicators to the goals and objectives of an intervention.
2. **Using existing data sources for measuring change.** Both national and provincial M&E practitioners stressed the need for the following:
 - a. Using existing registers, for example, the population register, the register of births and deaths;
 - b. Using district health information systems;
 - c. Using administrative records, for example school attendance;
 - d. Using annual reports for M&E purposes;
 - e. Using existing data bases, for example data collected by social development on pensions and other grants (SOCPEN);
 - f. Using census and survey data of Stats SA; and
 - g. Using data from existing systems, for example PERSAL, BAS, LOGIS and Vulindlela.
3. **Survey research principles and methods;** the following are essential for M&E practitioners in both national and provincial departments regarding learning about how to do research based on surveys (the training should include not only household surveys, but also other types of surveys, such as surveys among schools and other learning institutions, surveys among community organisations, etc.):
 - a. Understanding sampling methods and drawing a sample appropriate to measuring the indicators of the intervention;

- b. Developing a questionnaire or other measuring instruments;
 - c. Methods of collecting data, including, but not only, conducting fieldwork.
 - d. Methods of assuring that data collected are of good quality.
 - e. Methods of data capture, including editing and data cleaning.
 - f. Range and consistency checks, and imputations, if necessary.
- 4. Taking time lags and other aspects of time into consideration in M&E:** Both national and provincial M&E practitioners stressed the need for knowing:
- a. Methods of conducting panel surveys;
 - b. Methods of collecting longitudinal data;
 - c. Time series analysis; and
 - d. Trend analysis.
- 5. Qualitative research methods:** These were also stressed both nationally and provincially, including:
- a. Case studies;
 - b. Focus groups;
 - c. Rapid appraisals; and
 - d. Participatory research methods.
- 6. Other M&E methods:** stressed both nationally and provincially
- a. Definitions of M&E concepts;
 - b. Developing M&E standards;
 - c. Identifying specific target groups for interventions;
 - d. Measuring the quality of life and improvements in life quality;
 - e. Performance contracts and appraisals in relation to M&E;
 - f. Using human resources data on vacancy rates, absenteeism, leave, compensation, etc. for M&E purposes;
 - g. Tracking expenditure and collecting other financial data;
 - h. Communication skills; and
 - i. Using operational data, for example using information collected about clients who require social services.
- 7. Collecting background information:** This is important both nationally and provincially.
- a. Undertaking a situational analysis before embarking on an intervention, then during the intervention and afterwards.
 - b. Collecting baseline data;
 - c. Collecting data about the specific environment in which the intervention is taking place before, during and after the intervention, for example attitude studies, approaches to change.
- 8. Evaluation methods where there is no baseline:** This aspect was less important for provinces than it was for national departments
- a. Retrospective studies;
 - b. Risk assessment;

- c. Case-control methods used in epidemiology;
 - d. Understanding of intervening variables and their impact.
9. **Methods of ensuring that high quality data are collected;** This type of concern was raised in all focus groups, both national and provincial as a major issue.
- a. A clear understanding of data quality and an ability to evaluate data;
 - b. Setting quality standards;
 - c. Estimating the reliability of data;
 - d. Checking on the validity of data;
 - e. Ensuring accuracy of the data;
 - f. Ensuring that clear definitions of concepts are given with the data;
 - g. Statistical estimations of precision of the data.
10. **Impact analysis:** Focus group participants in the provinces and in national departments stressed impact analysis as important for M&E capacity building.
- a. Specific emphasis was placed on undertaking impact analyses, particularly in relation to understanding intended and unintended effects.
 - b. There is a need to have training on how to assess the environment in which the intervention is taking place.
11. **Methods of storing and retrieving data:** are required throughout the country
- a. Developing data warehouses;
 - b. Gaining access to data from these warehouses;
 - c. Interpreting data from different sources, taking collection methodologies into account.
12. **Methods of evaluating the quality of and using existing data;** This is required both at a provincial and at a national level, including:
- a. Existing survey data sets,
 - b. Annual reports and other reports submitted to users by departments,
 - c. Registers such as the population register, and
 - d. Administrative records, such as school attendance records.
13. **Data analysis and report-writing:** This a particularly important general requirement across the board
- a. Basic statistical principles;
 - b. Designing tabulation plans;
 - c. Preparing tables;
 - d. Interpreting tables;
 - e. Writing user-friendly narrative reports;
 - f. Drawing graphs and other ways of presenting data in a usable format.
 - g. Data security – how and where to share information
14. **Advocacy:** Some participants said that the following skills were needed:
- a. Communication skills; and
 - b. Networking principles.

Concerns that were raised in relation to training service providers

The following concerns were raised by participants in both provincial and national government departments in relation to universities, educational institutions and other M&E training service providers:

- There is a lack of understanding of the way in which government functions among people doing training for M&E.
- There is also the practice to take training that has been developed for very different situations in other countries directly into South Africa, without taking out country's specific circumstances and culture into account. This applies particularly to donor agencies giving M&E training.
- Standardised M&E manuals may be of assistance in enabling people to do their work more effectively, since M&E is relatively new in South Africa.

M&E internships

The suggestion was made at national level that an M&E internship programme for government employees in M&E, since this may be the best way of learning to apply knowledge acquired in training to the actual situation. Although this suggestion did not arise at provincial groups, it is a good suggestion for both levels.

A final recommendation

Since there is unevenness in the application of M&E principles in different provinces, it would be useful to run focus groups in all provinces. It would also help in getting buy-in for training in M&E for all provinces.