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Measuring Impact:
The Essential Role of Monitoring and Evaluation in Successful Programs

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Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) are necessary tools for programs seeking donor funding. Not only does M&E enable organizations to assess program effectiveness and make adjustments for greater success, but M&E also provides the feedback loop that demonstrates credibility to external stakeholders.

Increasing needs within the community combined with finite resources have prompted both government and private donors to seek out high quality programs that make a difference for the people they serve. For organizations to obtain external funding, they must present their program to donors in a way that proposes an effective, measurable approach in response to a need as well as a plan to demonstrate their effectiveness in achieving the results that they proposed to their donor. Simply tracking the number of people served or the number of services delivered to them alone is not enough to demonstrate impact; organizations should also define outcomes they hope to affect in the lives of those they serve and assess progress toward those outcomes.

Monitoring is the process of measuring program delivery through routine tracking of completed program activities and use of resources through record keeping and regular reports. **Evaluation** involves periodic assessment of change in results that are caused by those activities.

Some common terms related to M&E are:

Outcomes-based evaluation – measuring whether programs are really making a difference for clients by looking beyond the amount of money spent, number of people served, and client satisfaction to measure the real impacts, benefits, and changes in the lives of program beneficiaries.[i]

Evidence-based program – a collection of research-identified approaches and strategies that are packaged together and, based on rigorous, scientific evaluation, have been found to be effective in producing the expected positive results. The program evaluation methods and results must be peer-reviewed by experts in the field and the program should also be endorsed by a federal agency or respected research organizations as an effective program before it can be considered evidence-based.[ii] The rigorous evaluations needed to scientifically validate evidence-based programs utilize either **experimental** or **quasi-experimental design** to prove that changes experienced by program participants are a result of the program and cannot be attributed to other factors.[ii] Both of these study design methods compare program participants to a control group of individuals that did not participate in the program. These types of research can also measure the degree of change in program participants and the success of replicating the program to multiple contexts, both of which are used to compare the effectiveness of different program models.

Besides donor reporting requirements, there are many other good reasons and benefits to monitor and evaluate outreach programs.

1. Accountability and good stewardship: Showing that "we did what we said we would do" in terms of appropriate use of resources, and helping the planned number of people in the way that was described in the project proposal. Donors expect to be told how their money is being used and how much of a difference it is making.

2. Highlight successes: Confirming that the program "*works*" and telling the story of the difference the program made in the lives of recipients both individually and collectively. This is valuable information for convincing donors to fund the program, justifying expenditure, and communicating with potential partners.

3. Streamline efficiency while improving effectiveness: Identifying the *best* use of time and resources. Through process evaluation, programs can improve quality of services by identifying strengths and weaknesses, and verifying how current efforts lead to desired results. M&E also provides information needed to determine which program elements bring about the most positive change for recipients and whether to retain current practices or choose a new type of intervention to address the need.

4. Demonstrate program relevance to stakeholders and partners: Showing how program work supports organizational goals. Taking an outcomes-based approach to planning projects helps to check whether program activities are in line with the organizational mission and ensure that information of interest to stakeholders and partners is being tracked.

5. Improve programs by integrating and adapting best practices: Learning from the proven successes of others. This includes adopting evidence-based programs to implement.

6. Pioneer approaches and contributing to evidence base: Testing new ideas and giving organizations an opportunity to learn from each other. This includes establishing new evidence-based programs and sharing best practices.

7. Discover new needs within the community: If the planned activities do not consistently lead to the expected changes for participants, there may be other related needs that should be addressed in addition to the ones that were originally identified.

An essential process shared across M&E approaches is that of describing programs as organized systems of inputs, activities and processes, outputs, outcomes, and impacts.[i] This systematic illustration is called a logic model or logical framework, and having an understanding of its elements will assist programs in creating a monitoring and evaluation plan.

Inputs are *materials* and *resources* that programs use to provide services, such as staff time and volunteer hours, money, equipment, and facilities.

Activities are the *processes* conducted by the program for participants to meet their needs, such as mentoring, counseling, loaning, and coaching.

Outputs are *units* of activities provided by the program, such as the number of people served, number of training workshops conducted, number of youth mentored, and number of meals provided.
These first three elements can generally be controlled by program staff and comprise the "monitoring" portion of the system. These items track the number of people who went through the program and adherence to the program model, but not the impact on the people being served.

Outcomes are the *changes* and *benefit*s to program participants described in terms of knowledge and skills, behaviors, attitudes and values, and conditions and status. For example, "youth form healthy bonds with positive adult role models."

- **Outcome Targets** are the planned number and percent of participants that are expected to achieve a given outcome. For example, "100 (80% of) youth in the mentoring program will form healthy bonds with adult mentors over the next year."

- **Outcome Indicators** are *observable measurements* that show whether progress is being made toward the outcome targets. An example is "number and percent of youth who form healthy bonds after meeting with their mentor for 3 months and 9 months."

Impacts, sometimes describing the long-term, lasting outcomes for program participants, are the effects of the program activities and participant outcomes on the broader community. Population-level impacts are the result of efforts contributed by multiple programs and typically are not measured directly by individual organizations. However, considering the potential impacts of a program during the design stage and revisiting them periodically helps to maintain program relevance to community need. An example is, "city-wide decrease in juvenile crime rate."

The outline below describes the initial steps and decisions to be made when developing an outcomes-based evaluation plan:

1. Specify the **goals** of the organization and the **needs** that it hopes to address within the community: Know yourself and know your community

2. **Define** the program activities: What will you *do* to address the recognized needs? Describe the inputs (materials and resources), activities (processes), and outputs (measurable units of activities) of the program.

3. Establish the **scope** of the evaluation: What decisions will need to be made as a result of the evaluation, who are the primary audiences for the results, and what is the most useful way of reporting the results to these audiences? When, where, and how will information be obtained?

4. Choose **outcomes**: Describe the changes you hope to see in those who you serve
   a. What knowledge and skills do you hope your clients will gain within the first few months in the program? (short term)
   b. What behaviors do you hope your clients will have changed within the first year of the program? (intermediate)
   c. What attitudes, values, and status do you hope they will demonstrate after a year or more? (long term)

d. Connect the short, intermediate, and long term outcomes together: Activities should lead to the short term outcome, which leads to the intermediate outcome, which leads to the long term outcome.[i]
e. Assess the following for each outcome[iii]:
    i. Is it reasonable to expect that the program can influence the outcome being evaluated?
    ii. Will measuring the outcome help identify program successes and weaknesses?
    iii. Do the outcomes reflect and support the program's mission statement?
    iv. Will identifying the outcomes help the agency improve its services?

5. Select indicators: Decide **what** you should measure to show *what* you are doing and *how* you are doing it
    a. What can be observed about participants to demonstrate that they have made progress toward the chosen outcome?
    b. Select at least one indicator or performance standard to measure each expected outcome.
    c. Indicators should be **SMART**: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**elevant, and **T**imely.

6. Get input and feedback on the chosen outcomes and selected indicators from stakeholders such as the organization's board, program staff, current and former participants in the program, and an evaluation consultant to make sure that they are in line with the organization's mission, stakeholder priorities, participant needs and goals, and are measurable.

7. Identify practical data sources for selected measures and determine who, when, and how of data collection, management, and analysis.

8. Dissemination: **How** will you share evidence about your program and **who** will you share it with? What is the mechanism for providing the program with **feedback** to inform management decisions?

References

[i] McNamara, Carter (2006). Basic Guide to Outcomes-based Evaluation for Non-profit Organizations with Very Limited Resources, adapted from Field Guide to Nonprofit Program Design, Marketing and Evaluation. Found at: http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/outcomes.htm

[ii] Cooney, S.M., Huser, M., Small, S., & O'Connor, C. (2007). Evidence-based programs: An overview. *What Works, Wisconsin Research to Practice Series,* 6. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin–Madison/Extension. Found at: http://whatworks.uwex.edu/attachment/whatworks_06.pdf

[iii] Questions adapted from: http://www.nald.ca/literacybasics/evaluate/choosing/03.htm