

Creating a project monitoring system

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This material is from an expanded monitoring manual:
Cookingham, Frank G. (2002). "Guidelines for Project Monitoring Based on Logical Framework Analysis." Monrovia, CA: World Vision International.

Some material specific to World Vision International has been omitted to emphasize the material that I believe is useful for development facilitators in other agencies. With permission I have added some notes that are clearly marked, and I have formatted the content to stand alone.

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Overview of this approach to monitoring

[Note 2014. The companion paper on this site, "Introduction to Project Monitoring," describes the approach, which is both normative and systemic. A summary of key points:

- The principles and tools in this approach are designed for transformational community development. Most of them, however, can be applied to other community development approaches. Examples of principles include emphasis on facilitating respectful and caring relationships in the community; development is a process by which people in community work together to move toward meeting basic needs of all people in a way that deepens their relationships with God and each other, with emphasis on those people that are on the margins of society.
- In this approach to monitoring I recommend that four areas receive special attention. The first area is project staff performance regarding how they model the key values associated with transformation in speech and action, and especially interaction within relationships. The second area is conditions in the community and surrounding areas to become aware of discrepancies between the way things are and the way things should be as a community manages its development. The third area is achievement of community objectives that are related to basic needs. Fourth, monitor the effectiveness of efforts to strengthen the community's capacity to manage its own development.
- The basic purpose of a monitoring procedure is to alert managers and others to actual or potential problems in implementation so that adjustments can be made. A secondary purpose is to provide information regularly on progress toward achieving desirable results. Another secondary purpose is to provide information regarding accountability. Donors, boards of directors, senior managers, fundraisers and other

stakeholders need to know what is actually happening in a project. Then they can determine if legitimate expectations are being met.

End: Note 2014]

Basic systemic concepts

Several common terms are used with particular meanings to organize this discussion of monitoring. A brief glossary in Exhibit 1 provides a convenient reference.

Exhibit 1. Glossary of Monitoring Concepts

Term	Definition
Monitoring PROCEDURE	Group of activities done by people (monitors) who follow a plan to check program implementation.
MONITOR	Person who uses a monitoring procedure. The person may or may not have other program responsibilities. All program staff members do informal monitoring. It is strongly recommended that they become aware of the informal monitoring that they do, and make it more rigorous and therefore more useful.
Monitoring SYSTEM	Group of components related to some aspect of program implementation. Each component includes a description of a standard (goal, objective), a group of indicators, and a description of some adjustment to make when the situation deviates from the standard or the goal or objective is not being achieved. Development of the system may be guided by a framework that outlines basic categories of information that should be included in the system.
Monitoring PLAN	Description of how specific components from a monitoring system will be used, when they will be used (schedule), and how the results will be reported.
STANDARD	Description of the characteristics for acceptable performance, or for acceptable conditions.

Term	Definition
INDICATOR	Explicit procedure which provides trustworthy empirical information about the level of performance, or the status of conditions, related to an objective or a standard.
ADJUSTMENT procedure	Description of what to do when an indicator shows that the situation deviates from acceptable performance or conditions.

Monitoring procedure

A program monitoring procedure includes people, called monitors, who follow a plan for using some or all of the components from a monitoring system to check program implementation. Each component describes what information should be collected to determine whether or not the situation is consistent with some standard or planned achievement.

People as monitors

All managers act as monitors at least part of the time. When a manager checks on the implementation of any plan, she is monitoring. When a committee chairperson asks committee members if they have completed their assignments, he is monitoring.

Development facilitators usually monitor some aspects of project implementation quite systematically. For example, the quality of financial records, expenditures within budget, and rapport with local officials are usually monitored on a regular basis. But other aspects, such as leadership development, or sensitivity of community members to the needs of their neighbors, are monitored informally at best.

This paper and the three companion documents are intended to assist development facilitators perform the monitoring role more systematically for important aspects of project implementation. These facilitators include the local project manager and staff, members of a project committee, representatives of a partner agency, as well as senior management for the agency.

Monitoring system

A monitoring system is a group of components, where each component is a set of instructions for collecting and interpreting information about a work standard or project objective. The instructions include three elements:

- description of the STANDARD or objective,
- description of the INDICATORS which are used to describe actual performance or conditions related to the standard or objective,

- ADJUSTMENT procedure to initiate if the observed performance or conditions deviate from the standard or objective.

For example, a monitoring system for community participation could have three components. First, a standard may state that community meetings where program decisions are made shall have at least half of the men and half of the women present who live in the community. The indicator for this standard would be the count of men and women present. If less than half of the people of either gender are present, an adjustment procedure could be to help the project committee prepare and implement an action plan to increase attendance at the next community meeting.

Second, another standard may state that each family in the community shall participate in at least one project development activity during the year. The indicator would be a list of families that participated in each development activity. If a small number of families do not participate during the year, an adjustment procedure could be to help the project committee plan ways to encourage participation by those families in the future. If the number is large, then the adjustment procedure may be to help the project committee do a survey in the community to discover reasons for non-participation.

A third standard may state that project committee members shall be elected each year at a community meeting. An indicator could be the official minutes of the meeting that describes the election procedures and results. If no election has been held, the adjustment procedure may be to help the project committee to schedule an election. If election procedures were not appropriate, then the adjustment procedure may initiate some action by agency management.

File cabinet image

One way to think about a monitoring system is to imagine a very large filing cabinet with many drawers. Suppose each drawer represents a category of program implementation, e.g., the process of community development.

Now imagine that each drawer of the cabinet contains a set of file folders, where each folder represents an objective or standard in that drawer's category. There are many aspects of the development process for which standards can be defined. In the example described above there would be three file folders related to community participation, one for each of the three standards.

Within the file folder imagine that there is a description of the objective or standard on the first sheet of paper. On the next sheet of paper is a description of an indicator for that objective or standard, along with a description of an adjustment procedure to be initiated if the indicator result shows that the situation does not meet the objective or standard. On the next sheet of paper is a description of another indicator for that same objective or standard, along with an adjustment procedure. There may be many sheets of paper in the folder, each describing a different indicator and adjustment procedure.

From this perspective, a monitoring procedure includes people (monitors) who follow a plan for using some of the file folders selected from one or more drawers of the large filing cabinet.

Monitoring plans

Monitors follow a plan to ensure that the desired information is collected and reported in a timely manner. The plan states how specific components from a monitoring system will be used, when they will be used, and how the results will be reported. Monitoring plans should be prepared for logframe indicators related to the hierarchy of objectives and for indicators related to pertinent development standards.

For example, suppose the project coordinator decides to monitor attendance at community meetings for one year. The plan could be to attend a sample of community meetings, count the number of men and women present, and compare the numbers with the population of men and women in the community. If less than half are attending, the coordinator could meet with the project committee and help them plan what they will do before the next meeting to increase attendance. The plan can be diagrammed as shown in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2. Simple short monitoring plan for an indicator

Time Period: October - September, FY92
Monitor: Project Coordinator
Standard: Community meetings where program decisions are made shall have at least half of the men and half of the women present who live in the community.
Indicators: Meeting attendance figures in the minutes for each meeting. The monitor's count of men and women present at a meeting, compared with the number of men and women living in the community.
Adjustment procedure: If the percentage of men or women present is less than 40%, the project coordinator helps project committee members create a plan to increase attendance at the next meeting. Use the same indicator at the next meeting. If the percentage is 40%-50%, the project

coordinator mentions it to the committee chairman, suggesting that corrective action may be needed.

Reporting:

Each month, the reported attendance figures or the monitor's own count of the people attending the meetings that month will be included in the monthly report for that project.

In the September monthly report, a summary table of meeting attendance percentages will be included.

Because development facilitation is a complex process, a variety of indicators are required for each standard to have a reasonable chance of understanding what is actually happening and where problems may be evolving. This is in direct contradiction with the requirement, however, that only a few indicators can be monitored with limited resources.

To resolve this contradiction, it is recommended that three levels of information be collected periodically by an agency implementing a group of projects.

- Only a few items of information should be collected on every project. Perhaps one indicator is needed for each category of standards.
- Projects may be divided into groups, and different groups of items of information may be collected in each project group. This allows estimating patterns across projects while keeping the time required for collecting information in a given project relatively small.
- More detailed information must be collected when a deviation from a standard is noted. To keep time required for information collection and processing short, other scheduled information collection may be suspended.

The number of relevant indicators that can be monitored can overwhelm project staff. Selection of only the critical indicators needed at different levels of management at a given point in time improves effectiveness of any monitoring system. A project manager needs to know about exceptions on a daily basis. A project coordinator for several projects may need to know about a chronic exception in a particular project. A regional manager may need to know about an exception that is occurring in several projects. An operations head may need to know about an exception that is occurring in several regions.

Analysis of the problems most frequently encountered during each phase of project implementation will provide another guide for selecting standards and indicators. For example, during the first year it may be important to monitor the relationship between community leaders and community members, willingness of people to participate in project activities, the relationship between the community and agencies that can provide needed services, or planning skills in the project committee. Later it may be more important to monitor relationships of project community leaders with leaders in nearby communities, or skills of committee members in meeting with various levels of government officials. Development

facilitators in a particular office can identify the most typical problems they encounter in different phases of a project, and prepare a guide for selecting relevant monitoring components.

Deciding the focus for a monitoring plan may take some time because people may have very different expectations regarding important outcomes. It may be helpful to analyze a matrix of important outcomes in different categories for different stakeholders. To clarify outcomes, prepare examples of imaginary but realistic monitoring reports and resolve ambiguities. Encourage extensive dialogue around specific examples of reports because it will help decision makers to clarify their priorities. A monitoring plan that does not provide information on what decision makers regard as important outcomes will not improve project implementation.

A monitoring plan is designed for a specific period of time. The plan consists of a schedule of components in the monitoring system that will be used, along with procedures for using them. The plan needs to be changed as the project situation changes. A plan may include two or three standards for every community for one year, or a different standard for each community for three months, etc.

Summary of steps for creating a monitoring procedure

Useful monitoring is based on doing it while you do your work, day by day. Don't rely on someone else to do it for you.

- Step 1. Determine categories of implementation where problems are likely to occur.
- Step 2. Write standards, indicators, and adjustment procedures for each category.
- Step 3. Create short, simple action plans for collecting information.
- Step 4. Implement your plans for collecting information while you do your work; this is part of your work, not an interruption.
- Step 5. Reflect on your experience in collecting information and comparing it with standards. Adjust your list of categories, or descriptions of standards, indicators, and adjustment procedures within categories, based on your experience. Return to steps 1, 2; then continue with step 6.)
- Step 6. Display your information in ways that allow you to see problems immediately.
- Step 7. Act on your information. Return to step 3; continue the ongoing process of monitoring.

Characteristics of a good monitoring system

A good monitoring system meets four standards.

- The results of the monitoring are presented so that the manager can see immediately where there are potential problems in program implementation.
- The results are based on verifiable evidence.
- The costs for the monitoring procedures are reasonable according to the different groups of stakeholders associated with the program being monitored.
- The results are needed to assist managers and staff to do good work, or to maintain good relationships with groups of stakeholders.