Three Approaches to Monitoring: Feedback Systems, Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation and Logical Frameworks

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Abstract This article compares key attributes, strengths and weaknesses of three different approaches to monitoring development interventions: the logical framework approach, participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) and feedback systems. Academic and practitioner literature describes how logframes meet the needs of senior decision-makers to summarise, organise and compare projects. PM&E meets the needs of field staff to work sensitively with intended beneficiaries and support their learning and empowerment. Feedback systems appear to link the two, providing performance data for managers and creating incentives for implementing staff to focus on their intended beneficiaries. Feedback systems build on the rich heritage of PM&E and are compatible with logframes. They may help provide a manageable and effective approach to accountability that links the means and the ends of development interventions. Feedback systems are at an early stage of development. There is a lot to learn about how and where they work best.

1 Introduction

The theory and practice of monitoring and evaluation is cluttered with new ideas, novel approaches, and the latest toolkits. Few of these innovations endure and even fewer come to represent a shift away from the established paradigm. While the emergence of *feedback systems* is beginning to take root in development practice, it is timely to consider how they compare to two established approaches and whether feedback really does signify something new. In this article, the authors compare the origins and key attributes of feedback systems, participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) and logical framework approaches. The major strengths and weaknesses of each approach are discussed, based on a review of leading academic and practitioner literature. Logframes and participatory monitoring and evaluation were selected as two dominant and established approaches to monitoring in the international development sector. Feedback was selected as an innovative and encouraging emerging approach.

This article focuses on monitoring rather than evaluation. Monitoring is the measurement activity between design, at the beginning, and evaluation, at the end of a development intervention. Monitoring is generally seen as, 'a continuing function that uses systematic collection of data … to provide management and the main stakeholders of an ongoing development intervention with indicators of the extent of progress and achievement of objectives…' (OECD 2010). The aim of monitoring is to report progress, identify lessons and make improvements during the lifetime of an intervention.

Monitoring is closely related to the process of planning. Similar tools may be used for both processes, such as logframes and participatory techniques. The tools are often expected to meet many different stakeholders' requirements. The range of stakeholders involved may include: different groups of intended beneficiaries, implementing staff, operating partners, implementing managers, senior managers and

Box 1 DFID's experience with logframes

Since the mid-1980s, the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID) has adopted the LFA as part of its Project Memorandum. While the LFA has remained a key instrument, its application over the past few decades has been more variable in terms of the monitoring and management of interventions. Internal reviews have shown significant quality issues around objective and target setting, as well as with indicators and the robustness of evidence used to justify scores.[1] In 2009, DFID issued guidance for a revised and expanded version of the logframe, mandatory for all of their projects of £1 million or more. The revisions were designed to address weaknesses reported internally, by 'encouraging the identification of objectives at the right level; more robust specification of indicators; increased coverage of baseline and target information; and better quantification of results' (DFID 2009: 24). After many years' experience, apparently not all of the expected benefits of logframes were being realised.

The guidance states that the logframe 'will help you and your team to: achieve stakeholder consensus; organise your thinking; summarise and link the key aspects and anticipated impact of your project; communicate information concisely and unambiguously; and identify measurable performance indicators and the means of verifying progress' (DFID 2009: 5). Further benefits are listed, such as 'well defined outputs tell us exactly what we expect to see as a result of our project' (DFID 2009: 32).

donors. Their requirements may include: building their skills and confidence to take action, learning about the efficacy of different interventions, improving project activities, designing effective projects, communicating project activities and goals, approving project funding, winning funding and building a positive public profile. The different approaches discussed in this article respond to different priorities from this list.

2 Logical Framework Approach

The Logical Framework Approach (LFA) is widely used by many major development organisations to plan, manage and monitor interventions. The approach was originally developed for military planning in the USA. It was adopted by USAID for development projects in the late 1960s. In the 1980s it was adopted by many international and official development organisations. By the 1990s it had become standard in many major bilateral donors, much of the European Commission and many large international NGOs (Hummelbrunner 2010; Bakewell and Garbutt 2005; Nakabayashi 2000). In effect, it has become the leading industry-standard approach to planning, approving, managing and monitoring development interventions (see Boxes 1 and 2).

At the heart of LFA is the 'logical framework' matrix. Vertically, a 'results-chain' describes an intervention's activities and the outputs, outcomes and impacts which are expected to result from them. Variations of the approach substitute different terms such as 'goals', 'aims' or 'purpose' for different levels and use different definitions of 'outcomes'. The underlying logic is essentially the same. Horizontally, columns describe 'objectively verifiable indicators', 'means of verification' and 'assumptions', for each level of activities and results. The overall matrix sets out how a set of activities are expected to contribute to wider changes and how activities and changes will be monitored.

LFA has been the subject of long-running controversy in development assistance. The literature sets out strongly held views of its strengths and weaknesses. A body of evidence is emerging about the impact of logframes on different stakeholders' abilities to plan, manage and monitor development programmes.

Logframes bring significant benefits for a range of stakeholders. Their longevity suggests that, to a great extent, they meet the needs of powerful decision-makers in development organisations. Logframes provide a short and convenient summary of a project, useful for internal and external communications. They simplify complex social situations and make them relatively easy to understand, linking budgets to actions and expected results. This can be

particularly useful for the key management tasks of approving projects and allocating resources. They also provide a tool for setting measurable goals and the basis for assessing performance towards them: they provide a basis for holding implementing organisations or staff to account.

The literature describes how logframes can encourage project staff to think through the logic of an intervention and identify how a specific set of actions are expected to contribute to longer term impact and tackling root causes as well as symptoms of social issues. Proponents note that the wider Logical Framework Approach includes using participatory processes to develop logframes, such as working with partners and intended beneficiaries to identify objectives and indicators. They also describe how logframes can be revised during implementation, in the light of unfolding events. The logframe itself is described as a 'neutral' tool which when properly applied provides a framework for managing many different types of social actions. (Bakewell and Garbutt 2005; DFID 2009; Hummelbrunner 2010)

The literature also describes significant difficulties associated with the use of logframes (Bakewell and Garbutt 2005; Hummelbrunner 2010; Wallace 2006). Logframes assume that complex social issues can be reduced to one key goal shared by all interest groups, yet in general, this is inadequate for tackling political issues where interests diverge or conflict. Logframes assume a linear logic, that if 'a' happens, then 'b' will follow, and then 'c'. This is not an adequate model for describing social processes which are

uncertain, involving complex and often unpredictable interactions between different people and events.[2] Logframes tend to exaggerate the influence of external actors and do not tackle the problem of attribution: a development intervention is likely to be one factor among many related to longer term social change and seldom the most important one (for instance, compared to government, cultural norms or economic pressure). Logframes present a summary of actual events and analysis, which is open to a wide range of interpretations by different stakeholders.

There are also numerous cases where logframes do not work well for implementing staff. They often do not provide a useful guide for staff to tackle the daily issues they face in engaging with partners and local communities. Wallace (2006) found that field staff do not use them once implementation starts: there is a split between the documented plans and the work that is actually undertaken. Among the political realities of negotiating and agreeing project proposals, logframes tend to become inflexible. The more participatory the process in developing them, the harder it is to change them. Indicators can easily become targets, as Hummelbrunner (2010) describes in the EU PHARE project. Logframes have been described as 'lock-frames', inducing a project specific 'tunnel vision' which focuses on completing pre-planned activities, rather than engaging with changing realities on the ground.

The effect is exacerbated when logframes are used as the basis of accountability to donors, as future funding depends on completing the

Box 3 Outcome Mapping and ALPS: two alternatives to logframes

A critique of LFA led to the development of Outcome Mapping as an alternative by IDRC (International Development Research Centre) for interventions that aim to achieve behavioural change (Earl *et al.* 2001). Outcome Mapping has generated a lively debate in the sector. It is currently a minority monitoring approach compared to LFA.

In 2000, ActionAid launched ALPS (Accountability Learning & Planning System) in response to internal critiques of their results-based management framework. ALPS is a set of values to guide staff action and reflection. Implementation has been variable across the organisation. (ActionAid 2007). Other organisations have not adopted the approach.

activities and meeting the targets set out in the logframe. This accountability can only be effective based on the assumptions that: (a) logframes are developed with perfect foresight; and (b) unverified reports by implementing organisations are complete and accurate, despite their incentives to report success. This reduces the opportunity to consider unanticipated and negative consequences and so to learn and improve implementation (Ebrahim 2003; Bakewell and Garbutt 2005; Hummelbrunner 2010). Wallace (2006) describes for instance how these technical tools further increase the power and authority of external organisations, at the expense of supporting bottom-up action. They undermine the ability of staff to build strong relationships and partnerships and create incentives for a 'supply-led' approach to interventions.

The literature describes significant and consistent discomfort with the LFA. But the LFA continues to be used by most major organisations. It appears to have stood the test of time because it provides a straightforward summary that sets out the core logic and assumptions of an intervention alongside an approach to defining and monitoring 'success'. It appears to meet the needs of the more powerful decision-makers better than the alternatives currently available (Box 3).

3 Participatory monitoring and evaluation
Participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) is a blanket term that refers to a wide range of methods '… where primary stakeholders – those who are affected by the intervention being examined – are active participants, [taking] the lead in tracking and making sense of progress towards achievement of … results at the local level, and drawing actionable conclusions' (Hilhorst and Guijt 2006: 4). The term does not refer to any single specific method.

PM&E methods have emerged over the last three decades as part of the wider use of participatory methods in development practice, for instance from participatory action research to participatory learning and action, farming systems research and farming participatory research (Estrella and Gaventa 1998; Parks *et al.* 2005). They have also been linked to the growing appreciation of individual and organisational learning in the private sector (Estrella 2000). Hilhorst and Guijt (2006) identify three trends that have driven PM&E's development: (a) frustration with the limited abilities of other approaches to capture local knowledge, aspirations and views; (b) the need to continually adapt work to ensure it remains relevant to local people's priorities; and (c) pressure to enhance accountability to local people, implementing staff and partner organisations as well as to donors. Virtually all development organisations now have some participatory or consultative element in their programmes.

PM&E recognises that development results are subjective and vary between different interest groups (such as women and men). Its proponents see learning as a driver of development, and monitoring as an opportunity to contribute to learning at the local level. They argue that many areas that matter may be hard to measure, such as 'empowerment'. PM&E methods have been particularly associated with generating qualitative data. As Estrella (2000: 10) summarises, 'What most distinguishes PM&E from other more conventional approaches is its emphasis on the inclusion of a wider sphere of stakeholders in the M&E process. PM&E practitioners believe that the stakeholders who are involved in development planning and implementation should also be involved in monitoring changes and determining the indicators for success'.

The methods used for PM&E vary considerably to be relevant to each specific operating context. They have been grouped into four categories: (i) participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and related tools; (ii) audiovisual tools; (iii) quantitative tools; and (iv) tools from the 'anthropological' tradition. PRA tools vary from transect and group walks to matrix scoring and community mapping. Audiovisual techniques include storytelling, songs and the use of videos. Quantitative tools are adaptations from what are seen as 'more conventional' forms of monitoring, such as community surveys. Oral testimonies and participant observation techniques have been adapted from anthropology (Estrella and Gaventa 1998).

PM&E aims to align monitoring processes with the core development principle of supporting local analysis and action. In its ideal form, it places the most marginalised groups at the centre of systems, focusing on their views, which are liable to be sidelined in top-down approaches. It is argued that this strengthens local ownership of activities and so increases the chance that interventions are relevant, sustainable and effective. Communication may be enhanced between local people and implementing staff, strengthening collaboration and moving beyond 'monitoring as policing' to genuine reflection, learning and improvement. In these conditions, PM&E can be both the means and the end of empowerment.

The literature also identifies some significant limitations of PM&E. As in wider participatory practice, it may be difficult to achieve a high level of 'participation' in practice. Local elites may dominate dialogue and traditionally marginalised people may continue to be excluded. Achieving more 'authentic' participation means engaging with local politics and developing locally relevant methods. These processes tend to be time consuming and expensive (Cooke and Kothari 2001). The rigour of participatory processes, and the data they generate, is often questioned as being subjective and unreliable. It can be difficult to aggregate qualitative data or draw general conclusions from it. Institutional incentives tend to mitigate against PM&E: while donors and senior managers have sanctions that can force implementing organisations to meet their requirements, intended beneficiaries do not (Brett 2003). Authentic participation requires

other stakeholders to be willing and able to listen, change and share the power to make decisions, which can be contrary to their immediate interests.

A significant proportion of the literature on PM&E tends to assume an idealised commitment to participatory practice and that managers have the time and resources to invest in it. It does not consistently recognise the competing pressures that managers and donors face and their need for replicable systems that generate reliable performance data.

4 Feedback systems
Feedback systems are emerging as a subset of PM&E as a systematic approach to monitoring development interventions. They generate 'customer-orientated' data about intended beneficiaries' perceptions of how well an intervention is working during its life cycle. Feedback data can monitor either the process of an intervention (such as the quantity and quality of services provided by staff) and/or the results achieved (such as changes in farming practices or income).

The Oxford Dictionaries define feedback as 'information about reactions to a product, a person's performance of a task, etc. which is used as a basis for improvement.'[3] In the agricultural context, the Agricultural Learning and Impacts Network (ALINe) defines feedback systems as the systematic approach to collecting the views of smallholder farmers and other key stakeholders about the quality and impact of work undertaken by an implementing organisation.[4] This usually has a particular focus on generating quantitative data – data that may describe different dimensions of satisfaction based on farmers' own experiences and which can be tracked over time and compared (or benchmarked) across project sites. Such data can capture the perspectives of those who are often marginalised. If collected and analysed in a systematic way, it can provide valuable performance data to managers and funders. Where feedback systems are used to bring different stakeholders together to discuss data and identify actions for improvement, they can become a powerful instrument for learning and change.

Feedback systems in development have grown out of three bodies of work: participatory

monitoring and evaluation, social accountability and customer satisfaction. As described above, participatory monitoring and evaluation approaches have been paying careful attention to the perceptions and aspirations of intended beneficiaries for decades. More recently, the emergence of participatory numbers, described by Chambers as 'a quiet revolution', provide the means of generating quantitative data from participatory processes (Chambers 2007).

Social accountability is an approach to implementing the 'good governance' agenda, as a means for active citizens to hold governments to account for policy and practice. A variety of different methods have been developed, including feedback-based tools such as citizen report cards and community scorecards. These established methods are promoted by the World Bank, mirroring developments in domestic public management (Thindwa *et al.* 2005). They generate quantitative summaries of citizens' perceptions of government service delivery. The data are used as a tool for accountability, to engage with implementing organisations and encourage them to meet their obligations.

Customer satisfaction can be defined as 'a measure of how products and services supplied by a company meet or surpass customers' expectations'.[5] From roots in the early 1960s, it has become one of the best established approaches to assessing and analysing performance in the commercial sector. A whole industry has emerged to measure customer satisfaction and to help companies improve the customer-orientation of

their services (Bonbright and Power, this *IDS Bulletin*). A few initiatives have applied such principles to monitor the performance of development organisations as grant-makers and donors (See Box 4). However, surprisingly, very few development organisations apply these methods to monitor their own field work. While a few innovators exist such as CARE and ACDI/VOCA,[6] this suggests there may be a major gap in the international development sector.

The case for using feedback systems to monitor development assistance is still unproved. They appear to offer significant benefits and some suggestive examples are emerging. But significant questions remain unanswered.

Carefully implemented, it is argued that feedback systems can generate monitoring data for senior decision-makers and also improve practice at the field level: they can link management systems and participatory processes. The monitoring data summarises the views of intended beneficiaries, similar to customer satisfaction data in business. The process of collecting data and discussing it at field level can create opportunities to improve projects, strengthen relationships and help achieve development goals. If performance is monitored according to local people's opinions, then field staff have incentives to listen and respond to their concerns and priorities (Jacobs, this *IDS Bulletin*). For instance, in Bangladesh a social movement uses feedback from women's self-help groups to assess staff performance (Jupp and Ibn Ali 2010).

Table 1 Comparing feedback systems, PM&E and logframes

	Feedback systems	PM&E	Logframes
Main purpose	Generate real-time data on user perceptions during implementation	Empower local people to initiate, influence and control social actions	Oversight of activities, outputs and outcomes by managers and funders
Theory of change	Feedback drives analysis, dialogue and improvements to an intervention's activities	PM&E is integral to the development process, building local people's skills, knowledge and confidence	Predetermined activities lead to expected outputs, which in turn lead to outcomes and wider impacts
Incentives created	Staff and managers respond to the priorities of intended beneficiaries	Dual management systems created: one to work with beneficiaries and another to report to donors	Managers implement the original plan
Design approach	Mix of 'top-down' (organisational priorities) and 'bottom-up' (local priorities)	Bottom-up (local people determine the indicators)	Top-down (strategic objectives determine indicators)
Indicator areas	User perceptions, within generalised frameworks	Context-specific indicators (perception-based)	Objectively verifiable indicators
Typical data	Quantified summaries of beneficiaries' perceptions	Qualitative data of beneficiaries' experiences	Performance compared to predetermined indicators
Influences	PM&E, customer satisfaction, participatory numbers	Participatory methods, empowerment	Management by objectives, project cycle management, engineering
Key concepts	Theories of change, benchmarking, adaptation	Participation, learning, adaptation	Results chains, theories of change, outcomes

There is a powerful practical case that the people who are best placed to assess how well an intervention is meeting local priorities are the intended beneficiaries themselves: 'ask them' as Chambers put it (Jupp and Ibn Ali 2010). The gendered effect of development interventions can potentially be monitored by disaggregating feedback from women and men. When feedback data are benchmarked, comparisons can create a powerful incentive for operating units to improve: no one wants to stay bottom of the class. It is also argued that, as in PM&E more generally, feedback systems can align monitoring systems with central development principles of empowering local communities and helping them have more influence over the institutions which affect their lives. There is a powerful ethical case for development agencies to apply these principles internally to how they work themselves (Jacobs, this *IDS Bulletin*).

There are also concerns and challenges about implementing feedback systems, similar to those outlined above for PM&E. Feedback systems have to be sensitively adapted to the local context, which requires time and expertise, particularly to capture views from the most poor and marginalised people. Context-specific methods are required for data collection and engagement, often in local languages and locations, which create the conditions for honest reflection (Jacobs and Wilford 2010; Chambers 1997). These systems are liable to political manipulation, as respondents may give feedback that they believe will be most advantageous to them. As a result, high-quality data collection can be expensive, particularly at the field level. The development sector as a whole is at an early stage of creating practical tools that link high-level oversight with locally relevant concepts, such as the Coping Strategies Index (Maxwell and Caldwell 2008).

The benefits of feedback systems can only be realised if implementing staff and organisations have the flexibility to deliberate and respond to the data. Feedback is likely to be one consideration among many that influence senior

managers' decisions. Other factors may outweigh the views of local people, such as relationships with donors, government agencies and political allies. In the commercial sector, the benefits of customer satisfaction are only realised when companies see the link between customer satisfaction and the bottom line (Denove and Power 2006).

Emerging practice suggests that implementing organisations may have a great deal to gain from using feedback systems to monitor their performance. It is possible these may mirror the benefits that some businesses gain from monitoring customer satisfaction. Good practice is still emerging and there are important lessons to be learnt about how and in what contexts feedback can work best. Feedback is likely to be used as one approach to monitoring among several within any specific intervention.

5 Conclusions

This article has reviewed the attributes, strengths and weaknesses of three different approaches to monitoring development interventions: the logical framework approach, participatory monitoring and evaluation and feedback systems. The different purposes of monitoring and stakeholders' different priorities have been discussed.

Our analysis is summarised in Table 1. This table simplifies complex issues to draw out major contrasts between the approaches. It does not provide a complete or exhaustive description. In practice, attributes overlap across the three approaches, which are not always clearly distinguished from each other in exclusive categories. In many cases, they may be combined to create effective monitoring systems.

The three approaches meet different stakeholders' needs. In general, logframes meet the needs of senior managers and donors to summarise, organise and compare projects.

PM&E meets the needs of field staff to engage sensitively with local people and support their processes of building knowledge, skills and confidence. Feedback systems appear to offer a way of linking the two, by providing summary data for managers and creating incentives for implementing staff to focus on local peoples' priorities. There is suggestive evidence that they can improve accountability in development interventions.

Feedback systems do not attempt to replace PM&E, but build on its rich heritage. They also draw on key principles from customer satisfaction in the private sector. Feedback systems are not incompatible with PM&E or LFA, but are a clearly defined subset of approaches. They address some major concerns expressed in the literature about PM&E and LFA by creating new ways of reconciling the needs of managers while remaining focused on intended beneficiaries. They are also liable to the local complexities and institutional pitfalls that have dogged PM&E.

Development practice is littered with examples of over-engineered and complex monitoring systems that are developed as a result of top-down approaches.[7] They can become too ungainly to be useful. By focusing more narrowly on 'feedback' it may be possible to create smaller, more manageable sets of monitoring data – and importantly, incentives for interventions to be responsive to the priorities of their intended beneficiaries. This may help reduce the temptation to design monitoring systems that attempt to measure too much, too quickly and in the process become burdensome and unmanageable. In this way feedback systems may provide an entry point for the incremental development of more comprehensive and effective monitoring systems. There is still a great deal to learn about how feedback systems work most cost effectively and in which contexts.

Notes

1 'Assessing the Quality of DFID's Project Reviews', Agulhas report, March 2007.
2 Some have sought to overcome this by combining more network-orientated approaches with logical frameworks. See for example: 'The Social Framework as an alternative to the Logical Framework' (www.mande.co.uk, accessed 23 August 2010).
3 Definition from the Oxford Dictionaries online, http://oxforddictionaries.com (accessed 30 July 2010).
4 See www.aline.org.uk (accessed 23 August 2010).
5 Definition from www.wikipedia.org (accessed 2 August 2010).
6 See www.aline.org.uk/awards (accessed 2 August 2010).
7 Heeks (2002) and Heeks *et al.* (1999), for example, describe the failure of 'information systems' in developing countries more generally, though many of these include more monitoring-orientated systems such as Health Care Information Systems (HCIS).

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