

Commentary on ‘The Sorry State of M&E in Agriculture: Can People-centred Approaches Help?’

Zenda Ofir

Abstract In their article, Haddad, Lindstrom and Pinto highlight some of the most critical issues facing monitoring and evaluation today, not only in agriculture but across many fields of endeavour. Their rationale and call for better M&E, ‘people-centred M&E’ and ensuring that the multiple benefits of M&E are captured in the increasingly important agricultural sector is convincing, welcome and timely. However, these approaches will resolve only some of the issues that need to be addressed if M&E is to make a real difference in agriculture for development. A concerted effort with a stronger focus on larger systems within and beyond agriculture, novel practices and innovation in M&E will be needed. Will the M&E profession – especially in developing countries – rise to the challenge?

In their article ‘The Sorry State of M&E in Agriculture: Can People-centred Approaches Help?’ (this *IDS Bulletin*), Haddad, Lindstrom and Pinto throw down the gauntlet to the global M&E community. The authors challenge the M&E community to pay far more attention to integrating in an intelligent manner the context, experiences and responses of beneficiaries into agricultural planning, monitoring and evaluation; base organisational direction and action on what is known from experience, analysis and reflection, using M&E information; establish open, synthesised and comparative M&E information as public good that can shed light on the M&E system and the benefits it can provide (or the damage it can do).

The authors ground their arguments in the need to pursue the multiple purposes of M&E together. This highlights an important principle which ideally should underpin all M&E efforts. Perhaps the most difficult of these to implement is building stakeholder capacities to hold programme funders and implementers to account. Terms of reference for evaluation assignments and the recently completed Paris Declaration evaluation show that mutual accountability continues to be more rhetoric than reality. Indeed, the need for aid agencies to

satisfy their own taxpayer stakeholders in times of austerity runs contrary to what developing countries need most for sustained development – appropriate leaders and leadership styles – empowered people with a range of capabilities and knowledge, and strong organisations, institutions and systems. Aid-driven development appears to be shifting towards less risky, simple, ‘passive’ interventions that yield easy-to-grasp, convincing numbers. The current rhetoric around randomised control trials as the most ‘rigorous’ M&E evidence gives momentum to this unhappy situation.

Questions focused on understanding ‘why’, ‘how’, ‘for whom’ and ‘under what circumstances’ thus also stand to have less prominence, and we have the potential for a move away from a deeper understanding of context and the essential and sufficient conditions for success that are so critical for the successful implementation and sustained positive impact of complicated and complex interventions. Perhaps the greatest concern is that developing country governments may follow this trend rather than provide a counterbalance. As the authors infer, an urgent effort by funders and commissioners of M&E is needed to move away from the ‘toolification’ of M&E, and to implement robust, rigorous

(defined in a wider sense than is currently the case) methods grounded in a deeper interrogation of critical development issues.

The trend described above draws attention to the dire need to understand how M&E can address the issue of *sustainability* – that is, M&E that can improve our understanding of how interventions can be designed and conducted to increase the chance that their benefits will last *and* reinforce other development efforts. The current emphasis on ‘impact evaluation’ is also drawing attention away from this challenging issue. The authors of this article recognise its importance. ‘People-centred’ M&E is likely to enhance sustainability. But it requires deeper analysis, connected to the equally neglected issue of how to have more robust M&E of *unintended consequences*.

This is important for Africa. The major increases in funding and drum-rolls for a new ‘African Green Revolution’ based on arguments for increased production (rather than engagement with the whole agricultural system) and the use of GMOs (to the detriment of advancements that might yield similar benefits) provide good scope for such efforts. Will the M&E community have the motivation and capabilities to learn from the alarming lessons from the agricultural sectors in the USA and India, and apply these in their practice in Africa?

The arguments for organisational learning and learning organisations also highlight the critical role of useful monitoring by implementers and beneficiaries *for their own benefit*. There is a fallacy in the M&E community that monitoring only illuminates the quality of implementation. It can do much more. One of the best tools in the hands of implementers and beneficiaries today is the concept of ‘theories of change’ – as long as they are understood not as the old, usually top-down designed and rigidly applied ‘logframes’, but as the detailed development, testing and adapting of causal pathways and the assumptions underlying them. This offers an empowering approach for those engaged in development, and

can be much more effectively applied than has been the case to date.

‘People-centred M&E’ highlights the need for change in critical areas in agricultural M&E. But it does not address all the challenges, nor do its authors profess it to do so. Additional aspects that warrant further attention from the M&E community include the need to focus efforts on:

- agricultural systems rather than only projects or elements of a system;
- the issues affecting the expansion of interventions, thus evaluating *for* up-scaling and transferring;
- the critical role of power asymmetries in both development and in M&E;
- the effects of regional agendas and global policy regimes on agricultural strategies and impacts;

and, as noted above

- issues of sustainability and unintended consequences; and
- the use of sophisticated yet practical theories of change for evaluation *and* for monitoring.

Concerted action by a variety of M&E actors will be needed to improve the quality of M&E and come to grips with the challenges posed in this article. Sadly, our mindsets, organisational cultures, institutional systems and, yes, political, commercial and ideological pressures often stand in the way of real progress. This article should be read to challenge developing country M&E actors to take the lead in this important field of development. It is, after all, our future that is at stake. M&E has emerged as a profession in developing countries only in the last decade. Yet capacities are being built and new approaches that support the interests of developing countries are appreciated. This article has been written with these interests in mind. We therefore trust that this call to action will not be ignored by powerful actors in the M&E field in developed and developing countries alike.