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IMPROVING THE CAPACITY FOR AGRICULTURAL PLANNING
AND POLICIES IN AFRICA

PART A

STRENGTHENING MONITORING AND EVALUATION
OF AGRICULTURAL PROJECTS AND PROGRAMMES

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

The recent practice of inclusion of monitoring and evaluation systems in agricultural projects especially donor funded projects has been an important attempt to improve the implementation of agricultural projects. However, the operation of Monitoring and Evaluation (M & E) systems has been variable and much of their potential value unrealized. It is important to diagnose the reasons for this. This paper reviews the monitoring and evaluation experience of selected agricultural projects in Africa in which to base proposals for strengthening and improving M & E on future projects and programmes.

I. CONCEPTS AND PURPOSES OF MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Monitoring and evaluation provide the means by which project managers and planners can chart the progress of project implementation towards the achievements of its targets and objectives. It enables management to take corrective action when it detects implementation deficiencies. It provides management with the means of assessing the efficiency, effectiveness, relevance and impact of a project. It is important to underline the differences in resources and time required for the acquisition, processing and analysis of information for monitoring purposes as against those for evaluation. The former usually requires the comparatively easy collection of data relating to direct monitoring indicators. Evaluation often necessitates the lengthy and difficult acquisition of field data deriving from farm and household surveys. The balance of resources devoted to monitoring and evaluation is, therefore, a critical decision, for it is easy to undertake M & E activities which exceed the resources available to it. Indeed, M & E has often been over-ambitious, with large evaluation studies being carried out at the expense of monitoring a project. This has seriously reduced the value of M & E which some of the case studies illustrate.

II. EXPERIENCE OF MONITORING AND EVALUATION IN AFRICA

The worst failures of M & E systems occurred on the large, rural development projects initiated in several African countries in the 1970s. These include the Agricultural Development Projects (ADPs) in Nigeria, the Lilongwe Land Development Programme in Malawi and the Integrated Agricultural Development Project in Kenya. On the Nigerian ADPs, for example, a separate Monitoring and Evaluation Unit (MEU) operates a large M & E system under the direction of central M & E unit which designs and operates a huge data gathering, processing and analysis operation. Furthermore the M & E system and its activities are independent of project management. Most of the M & E resources are directed to large effects and impact surveys of crop yields, farm characteristics and income. Vast amounts of information have been generated which, because of limited processing capacity, remained largely unprocessed and therefore unused for several years.

It is quite possible for large rural development projects to avoid these serious defects, and this is shown on the ADPs in the Cameroon and Liberia. So far, these projects have achieved a good balance between monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring of project inputs and activities is undertaken by project staff. A reasonable number of evaluation studies are undertaken by a small monitoring and evaluation unit (MEU), which comprises part of the management team under the project manager. This means that management is closely involved in the M & E process and that evaluation is undertaken to meet, in the main, management requirements.

The M & E system on the Mwea irrigation settlement scheme in Kenya is the most efficient one to have been recorded. It serves a very efficient management system and reflects the management structure, focusing on the annual farm operation requirements of the single, irrigated rice crop. Monitoring is undertaken entirely by the project staff and good communication and feedback is therefore achieved, enabling management to respond quickly to any emergency or setback. It also assists the management to enforce tenant discipline to ensure the achievement of timely farm operations and hence high yields, which are the basis of the project's success.

The Wood Energy Project in Malawi was designed to produce tree seedlings for household woodlots for rural woodfuel users and for government plantations for urban users. The monitoring of nursery activities and seedlings produced, etc. was done by the project field staff and a separate MEU concentrated almost entirely on evaluating project impact and testing the project assumptions and objectives. A serious over-production of tree seedlings led to a series of evaluation studies and field surveys to investigate the reason for this. These exposed serious planning deficiencies of the project and called for its complete reorientation and redesign. The MEU was independent of project management and in calling for profound changes in the design and direction of the project, on the basis of its evaluation studies, it was not very popular with management. This is perhaps an extreme example, for projects can rarely be so badly planned. But it does show there is a place for evaluation studies to question project assumptions and objectives, where these are shown to be necessary by discrepancies thrown up in the first place by project monitoring.

The Kenya National Extension Project involves the strengthening of Kenya's agricultural extension system and improved linkages between research and extension and is based on the training and visit (T & V) system. Its aim is the continuous provision of simple, improved practices and technologies relevant to farmers circumstances. It requires a network of on-farm trials, feedback between extension and research, continuous staff training and regular farm visits of contact farmers and their neighbours. The M & E system is also designed to provide management with timely information regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of the extension activities and is district based. Monitoring at district level is undertaken by M & E field enumerators for the use of district agricultural officers and their rapid response to district level deviation. M & E of the national project is done by a small MEU, aggregation of district results, for use of the Ministry of Agriculture. The M & E system has proved itself very useful to management and is relatively low cost. This is because both monitoring and evaluation needs are based on a single simple farm survey using proxy indicator to measure the effectiveness and impact of the project. In many ways, this is the model M & E system for the future.

III. PROPOSALS FOR STRENGTHENING MONITORING AND EVALUATION IN AFRICA

There should be an expansion of M & E on agricultural projects, especially indigenous ones, funded locally, but they should adhere to the following guidelines:

(a) Project M & E systems should give priority to monitoring. M & E is primarily a management tool and its priority task is the provision of information which contributes to effective management decisions;

(b) Evaluation should only be done when it is required; when monitoring reveals a discrepancy which requires investigation;

(c) Impact evaluation should rarely be undertaken and never involve large, farm economic surveys, which have little value for implementing current projects;

(d) Evaluation studies must not claim resources from monitoring;

(e) They should use simple, field surveys with modest aims;

(f) Ex-post evaluation should be undertaken only under special circumstances, rather than as a matter of course;

(g) The move towards simpler M & E systems makes the large, highly specialized MEU outmoded because most of the monitoring duties will be carried out by project staff;

(h) The strengthening of M & E should be supported by special training programmes.

The expansion of a simpler, streamlined M & E on future agricultural projects and Programmes is the main recommendation. It will provide low cost information systems which can be operated by local project resources and provide management with key information for the efficient and effective implementation of agricultural projects.