Monitoring at non-governmental organisations

Madri Jansen van Rensburg
Department of Psychology
University of South Africa
madrijvr@gmail.com

Abstract
Monitoring and evaluation of the activities and impact of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) are crucial for continuous learning and decision making. Monitoring of activities is viewed differently by grassroots organisations and donor organisations. Monitoring should be a continuous process, which should begin at the planning phase of a project or programme. A case study approach is used to illustrate key concepts and share important insights into monitoring and evaluation systems, as well as tool development. Project Support Group (PSG) has been working in nine Southern African countries. A peer education prevention model was developed as part of the PSG HIV prevention strategy. The ten modules of the PSG model include various monitoring processes and tools. In this article, the experience of PSG and the PSG Model is used to describe the importance of, and practicalities in developing monitoring and evaluation systems and tools for projects. The importance of monitoring efforts and their contribution to decision making is highlighted. Key lessons, formulated after more than 25 years experience with grassroots NGOs and various donor funding organisations are shared to raise awareness of the importance of monitoring and evaluation and to enhance monitoring efforts.

Keywords: HIV and AIDS; logical framework monitoring and evaluation; non-governmental organisations; peer education; Project Support Group Model

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) forms an integral part of any programme or project in the non-governmental organisation environment. Monitoring begins in the planning stages of any project and should be conducted continuously (Olive, 1998; Shapiro, 1996). It is crucial to have systems in place from the initiation of a project. Continuous monitoring and regular evaluation of the process, outcomes, and impact are essential. Informed decision making is seriously compromised when decisions are not based on monitoring information (Buckmaster, 1999; Mebrahtu, 2002). Monitoring also provides a method of detecting deviation from the project focus or needed redirection of strategies and activities. For data to be refined to measure performance and achievements against realistic indicators requires a process,
as depicted in Figure 1. The use of a team approach is crucial. It is possible (and advisable) to have a dedicated person to manage the monitoring efforts, but without the input of all key roleplayers (especially those with decision making powers) and involving all levels of activities the system will fail. It is especially important to raise awareness of the importance of monitoring (not only when initiating a project or a monitoring system, but continuously throughout the project and while collecting and using data). This should not be seen as an ‘add-on’ (value-adding) activity, but as an integral (and essential) part of project activities.

**Figure 1:** From monitoring to decision making

With changes in the donor environment and the competition for scarce funding more and more emphasis is placed on developing and maintaining good M&E systems (Henderson, 1997; Pieterse, 1997). The implications for NGOs working in resource-limited settings, especially smaller NGOs involves two extremes – on the one hand they lack skills and resources, while on the other hand monitoring activities improve not only the quality of the services delivered (through transparency and accountability), but also the attraction of other funding and donors (Beamon & Balcik, 2008; Gray & Bebbington, 2006; Hilhorst, 2002; Kaplan, 2001). Monitoring is often seen as something ‘imposed on’ the NGOs by donors as if the NGOs are not able to solve their own problems (Henderson, 1997). Organisations that diversify their funding (a very important strategy for survival) further have to deal with satisfying the monitoring needs of a variety (and diverse range) of donors with different requirements. Monitoring activities are then seen as time consuming
and a waste of resources that could be better applied to cater for the needs of the beneficiaries (Henderson, 1997).

Various challenges exist for NGOs’ monitoring activities and performance, compared to for-profit organisations. These include the intangibility of the services offered, unknown outcomes, and the variety, interests, and standards of stakeholders, especially donor organisations (Beamon & Balciş, 2008; Mebrahtu, 2002).

This article aims to describe the benefits of having a comprehensive system that will satisfy internal and external monitoring needs. The case of a regional intermediary organisation (between governments or large funders and grass-roots NGOs) will be used to describe the benefits of practical (easy implementable) monitoring tools (including participatory methods). PSG works regionally in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in the HIV and AIDS prevention and mitigation fields. PSG has its own monitoring and evaluation system (not the focus of this report), and has a duty to disseminate information to partner organisations similar to the responsibility of international NGOs (Mebrahtu, 2002).

**THE PROJECT SUPPORT GROUP (PSG) MODEL**

**HIV and prevention work**

Southern Africa remains the epicentre of the global AIDS pandemic and is home to more than a third of all people living with HIV and AIDS worldwide. National HIV prevalence rates exceed 15 percent in eight SADC countries (Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) (Shisana et al., 2005). South Africa has the highest HIV prevalence among pregnant women and the largest number of people living with HIV and AIDS in the world, with HIV prevalence rates in the population of 2 years old and above is reported to be 10.8% (males 8.2%, females 13.3%) (Shisana et al., 2005).

Prevention activities have always been important in the response to HIV. The economic, social, and personnel costs involved in prevention far outweighs those required to manage the individual, family, and society at large infected and affected with HIV. By the late 1980s, there was a growing recognition that prevention campaigns successfully instilled widespread awareness of HIV, but did not lead to significant changes in sexual behaviour (Shisana et al., 2005). Responses to this saw increasing emphasis on community education approaches, which encouraged local agencies and communities to take responsibility and leadership, and to define their own responses in support of safer sexual behaviour. Special emphasis was placed on low-income women, migrants, and people who work away from home. As such, peer education activities have been increasingly focused on the sharing
of knowledge about safe sex behaviour, distributing condoms, and referring peers to health services for the treatment of Sexually-Transmitted Infections (STIs). Such approaches remain relevant in the context of high prevalent environments in Southern Africa (Shisana et al., 2005).

**PSG and the PSG Model**

PSG was one of the organisations that responded in the Southern African region, supporting community-based initiatives of 40 NGOs in nine SADC countries. PSG developed a model of peer education that has been well tried and tested with proven results, good quality outcomes and impact, and flexible to the changing HIV environment. The model focuses on behavioural change rather than awareness campaigns. One of the key strengths of the model is that various monitoring and evaluation systems are built into the overall model.

The theoretical foundation of the PSG Peer Education Model is the Social Diffusion Theory (Surry & Farquhar, 1997). The theory states that people do not evaluate changes according to scientific or authoritative evidence, but by subjective judgement by trusted peers who have adopted changes and provide persuasive role models for change. This normative influence promotes behavioural change. The PSG Model uses a cascade, pyramid, or tiered approach, in which a professional coordinator trains an assistant coordinator and peer educators, who in turn educate the public. This approach might introduce the possibility of loss of consistency and quality through dilution. To promote consistency and quality, systematic and structured methods, mechanisms, systems, and procedures must be pursued. Figure 2 provides an overview of the ten modules that underlie the PSG Peer Education Model (PSG, 2008). The ten modules include: **Module 1**: Introduction and pre-set up activities; **Module 2**: Logical framework; **Module 3**: Formative research; **Module 4**: Participatory approaches; **Module 5**: Quality assurance of outreach meetings; **Module 6**: Field support; **Module 7**: Monitoring and Evaluation; **Module 8**: Operational research; **Module 9**: Financial management; and **Module 10**: Project report.
Figure 2: Overview of PSG Peer Education Model

All these modules include aspects of monitoring. The implications of each module on monitoring and evaluation activities will be described briefly with each module.

Module 1: Introduction and pre-set up activities

This module deals with the activities that outline information needed to design an intervention programme. It describes how to gather information on the target audience/beneficiaries quickly, affordably, and as accurately as possible. It involves mapping the target area (and dividing it into manageable zones) and determining
the feasibility of initiating interventions. Documentation (including the proposed project’s map) provides a foundation for monitoring activities.

**Module 2: Logical Framework**

A logical framework (Log frame) is a planning, monitoring, and evaluation tool (Olive, 1998; Shapiro, 1996). It uses a table format with columns and rows, where rows represent different project goal levels from overall goal to activities, and the columns represent the way in which achieving these goals and objectives can be verified and assumptions made (see Table 1 for an illustrative logical framework). This logical framework provides the basis of all monitoring and evaluation activities (to be supplemented by participatory qualitative methods) and informs the project in decisionmaking.

The following is determined and documented for each of the levels of the project during planning:

- Long-term Goals (Biomedical impact);
- Short-term Goals (Behavioural impact);
- Outputs (Organisation/project capacity); and
- Activities (Project support inputs).

For each level, especially output and activity, four key aspects should be determined and documented and used throughout the project cycle. The first is a Narrative Description for each long-term goal, short-term goal, output and activity. Measurable Indicators (MI) are then determined for each, followed by a description of Means of Verification (MOV) for each of the indicators. Stating Important Assumptions forms the last column.
Table 1: Logical framework for HIV prevention peer education project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LONG-TERM GOAL (BIOMEDICAL IMPACT)</th>
<th>10% reduction in HIV incidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SHORT-TERM GOALS (BEHAVIOURAL IMPACT)</td>
<td>70% consistent condom use 30% reduction of numbers of sexual partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUTPUTS (ORGANISATION/PROJECT CAPACITY)</td>
<td>Conduct 4 000 annual meetings, reach 100 000 people Distribute 500 000 condoms Project cost average: US$ 1 per 10 people reached</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTIVITIES (PROJECT SUPPORT INPUTS)</td>
<td>100 capacity building activities done 400 person days project implementation assistance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative summary</th>
<th>Measurable indicator</th>
<th>Means of verification</th>
<th>Important assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Long-term goal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short- term goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Module 3: Formative Research

Formative research is used to obtain information to guide project intervention development (a needs assessment). It is important to organise the information and analysis of information around the previous two modules (that is the map generated for the project and the goals and logical framework determined for the project).

Various methods can be employed to gather information, including key informant interviews and direct observations of areas and events of interest (including bars and suburbs). Focus groups or group interviews with different stakeholders, for example community members (employees in case of workplace programmes), health care workers, traditional healers, community and traditional leaders, police services, and so on, and secondary sources (including consulting academic journal...
articles and research study reports, newspapers, epidemiological and health surveys studies, hospital and clinic records, and statistics) are also used. Interviews of target audience/beneficiaries are important at the beginning of the project and at regular intervals for the duration of the project. At the beginning of the project, baseline information (before or just after intervention started, usually in the form of a rapid assessment) assists in designing an appropriate intervention. Follow-up data (after the project has been running for a while) are used to compare knowledge, attitudes, and practices with baseline data to evaluate intervention effectiveness.

Triangulation can be used to ensure accuracy of the information. Triangulation is the use of different methods of collecting and analysing data. The major conclusions of the different methods of data gathering are compared for areas of agreement and disagreement. Evidence is used when discrepancies arise. An informed decision can be made after considering all the information gathered (Patton, 2002).

**Module 4: Participatory Approaches**

In the PSG Model, participatory, interactive approaches are used to challenge people to confront, reflect on, develop their own responses to, and build their own normative consensus concerning sexual behaviour. This necessitates abandoning didactic and prescriptive approaches and developing participatory, interactive ones. The major categories of activities (participatory approaches) include: one-minute roleplays, ten-minute dramas, picture codes, participatory games, serial pictures, and songs.

Monitoring of these activities is done by the peer educators themselves, who continuously document newly developed activities and material. An advantage of documenting activities is that information can be shared not only between peer educators (also in succession planning and transfer to new peer educators), but also between projects. Monitoring of the quality of the peer education activities is described in the following modules.

**Module 5: Quality Assurance of Outreach Meetings**

This module aims to assist organisations to develop a structured system to enable them to manage and monitor their activities on a day-to-day basis. This includes different levels of project staff, from those who deliver services to those who manage the project. For example, participatory activities are conducted systematically throughout the designated project area, and aim for consistent and complete coverage. For this reason, all peer educators use their map during their weekly training to decide on places in need of outreach visits. Dates and times are specified with the zone leaders coordinating each zone’s activities and the project coordinator managing the project site as a whole.
Peer education is a pyramid approach, in which community volunteers are trained to train others. In any such approach, dilution and distortion present a potential threat to quality. A simple, well structured, quality assurance system that can be incorporated in the day-to-day management and monitoring of the programme will help to safeguard quality. All activities are recorded by peer educators, summarised by each zone’s group leader, and compiled and analysed by the coordinator.

The transmission of correct, balanced, and factual information is critical to ensure quality. The best way to ensure commitment to factual accuracy and quality in the project is to use checklists (used in planning and monitoring each outreach activity). PSG projects use two checklists:

Information checklist: An information checklist enables peer educators to construct an AIDS information framework, which helps them to focus on accurate, priority information and guide them away from interpretive errors. The checklist summarises the most important facts about AIDS and each peer educator learns each fact and its implications to the person being educated, and is trained to ensure that the information they present corresponds with these facts.

Quality-assurance checklist: In addition to the information checklist, a quality assurance checklist is used to plan and review the organisation, content, and conduct of each meeting. This quality assurance checklist guides activities and allows checks of performance against several concrete criteria and the assignment score for quality.

Module 6: Field Support

Field support is provided to assist all levels of project staff to support basic activities. If a programme is to succeed, the utmost emphasis must be placed on follow-up and field support at every level, from the Director to those performing basic activities. This should be as systematic and as structured as possible. Without a structured and rigorous follow-up system, it will not be possible to provide effective follow-up, at all the tiers required to all field personnel involved. A structured follow-up chart is suggested (see example in Table 2 of a follow-up chart).
Table 2: Follow-up chart for field visits (example: peer educator support)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of telephone calls made to Peer Educator</th>
<th>No. of field visits to Peer Educators</th>
<th>No. of Peer Education meetings attended</th>
<th>Date of next visit</th>
<th>Action steps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes 1.
2.
3.

Module 7: Monitoring and Evaluation

Module 7 assists with the development of monitoring and evaluation tools to be used in conjunction with the logical framework and as a means of verification.

Closely allied to the focus on methodical, structured, participatory quality assurance and follow-up systems is an emphasis on a comprehensive, systemic, and streamlined monitoring and evaluation package, comprising all the planning, monitoring, and evaluation tools required to monitor and evaluate activities. It is further suggested that quantitative approaches (e.g., statistics) and qualitative approaches (including narrative and pictorial accounts) be incorporated in the monitoring of projects.

The PSG Peer Education M&E package constitutes the following tools: project register; peer educator register; meeting schedule; peer educator planning and monitoring dairy; peer educator dairy summary report; coordinator’s summary report; monthly coverage review; project form; as well as coverage and impact surveys.

It is important to remember that the system should include all the information needed to improve on decision making; yet it should not be exhaustive and include all possible sources. Only the most relevant sources for each indicator should be included.
Module 8: Operational Research

Operational research and process documentation is strongly recommended to make programme personnel more reflective and analytical, to synthesise and distil the important experience and lessons that emerge from the programme. It further assists in developing a body of programme management research and to share and disseminate relevant project information, achievements, and lessons learned. This process of reflection and synthesis helps to inject performance demands and a performance and results-orientated culture into an environment in which performance pressures may be absent.

Operational research does not only include formal research studies, but also important documentation. Documentation includes amongst other things, a detailed description of programmes or projects and each of their sub-components; analyses of the planning, management and monitoring systems used by programmes or projects; descriptions of key management principles for the effective implementation and management of programmes or projects and the analyses of project dynamics and relevance and reviews of the impact of projects. Gathering and documenting illustrative quotations, examples, vignettes, and case studies, exemplifying key programme developments, achievements, obstacles, and lessons are also very important.

Module 9: Financial Management

This module enables organisations to have systems that simplify, streamline, and strengthen financial management in their projects. Procedures regarding financial record keeping and different types of payments are suggested. The basic products that reflect monitoring of financial activities and financial accountability should include a documentation system that reflects all vouchers. Basic financial documentation, quarterly financial statements, and annual audited financial reports are all components of the financial management and monitoring system.

Module 10: Project Report

The project report aims to communicate project information, activities, and progress to a variety of stakeholders. The structure of project reports is determined by the intended audience. Different types of reports might be required, such as annual reports and progress reports to donor organisations. Reports to supporting organisations such as PSG usually include the following aspects: (1) A brief Background with a description of project area, history of the project and the reasons for choice of intervention strategy; (2) A description of the Intervention, including goals and objectives and major components of the intervention; (3) the Success of the intervention and measurable achievements relating to project objectives (outputs,
unit costs, coverage) and reduction in HIV prevalence; (4) Discussion; and (5) Conclusion.

Progress on activities and achievement of outcomes and goals are often reflected in a logical framework. Narratives of exceptional stories and photos are included to support quantitative information, capture the essence of achievements and project activities, and to enhance the report. Challenges should be mentioned in relation to possible solutions.

RELEVANCE OF MONITORING

Monitoring and evaluation activities are relevant for two different systems – Internally for the organisation and externally for stakeholders (including donors, intermediate bodies such as PSG, governmental structures, and so on).

Internal

The modules included in the PSG model allow for and describe monitoring (and evaluation) activities relevant to the activities of the organisation (project). The modules provide ‘minimum standards’ (or monitoring standards) for project activities. It includes various monitoring tools to be used by the project on different levels of activities (e.g., the use of a logical framework, collection of narrative descriptions, quality checklists, and so on).

External M&E

Monitoring of the organisations can be seen as an external monitoring activity. It can also be regarded as reporting on internal monitoring activities. This ‘external’ monitoring (or the reporting of activities) is often seen by organisations as the only monitoring tool needed, as illustrated by the study by Mebrahtu (2002) – the study involved international NGOs, a country office, and field offices in Ethiopia. The following statements were made by individuals at various levels:

Field office: M&E keeps those above us happy and allows the project to get feedback on its overall performance;

Country office: M&E is [a] useful tool for improving internal standards and [is] the means through which we continue to receive funding;

Head office: M&E contributes to the learning process within...

(Mebrahtu, 2002, p. 507)
The goal of internal monitoring therefore becomes the reporting and accountability of the organisation. This is done without an understanding that ‘internal’ monitoring is the aspect that allows for decision making and that external monitoring demands by donors and other stakeholders are merely reporting on activities and achievement of goals. Donors are often very prescriptive, not only in reporting formats, but also in data collection tools. This should be incorporated into the M&E system of the organisation in a manner that is not time or resource consuming, yet extensive enough to satisfy donor requirements. In the case of PSG different monitoring tools are used, including a prescribed activity reporting form (in tabular form and recording activities quarterly), narrative reports, financial reports, and field visits.

EVALUATION

Evaluations are usually considered more costly and are usually done externally. Projects supported by PSG included some aspects of internal evaluation (e.g., cost analysis).

PSG conducts surveys in selected project sites annually. These include outcome and impact assessments such as Behavioural Surveillance Surveys and Quality of Life assessments. During the 2005 annual mitigation (Quality of Life) surveys, a mixed methods approach was used, which incorporated a qualitative method with the surveys. The Most Significant Change (MSC) method was selected (Davies & Dart, 2005; Mosse, Farrington, & Rew, 1998). This is a narrative participatory method. The training at the different organisations included introducing the method to the organisation. The method is cost-effective (as it does not involve highly skilled personnel or equipment or resources) and includes participation of different levels of staff and beneficiaries. The method is now employed by many organisations and projects as an ‘internal’ evaluation method. MSC and other participatory methods have the benefit that it can detect project achievements that are not predicted (not included in the logical framework and that have no indicators). It is used from project level up (instead of the usual prescriptive methods) as described and advocated by Awio, Lawrence, and Northcott (2007). It also provides immediate feedback to participants (including project staff and beneficiaries) as it does not require time-consuming steps of data entry, analysis, and report writing (Mebrahtu, 2002). It further creates community ownership by including stakeholders and beneficiaries, and it includes the perspectives of different stakeholders (Gill, Emah, & Fua, 2005).
CONCLUSION

The following are lessons learned by PSG through its continuous involvement with partner organisations:

Multi-country (cross-cultural) monitoring and evaluation is possible. It seems a daunting task to develop systems that will fulfil the needs of the intermediate organisation reporting on its own goals and those set by the participating organisations in different settings, but this is achievable even in areas where resources are limited.

Monitoring activities, when used as part of a model, become standard practice and cannot be separated from day-to-day activities. Many people are even unaware that they are involved in monitoring activities.

Documentation (of activities, including monitoring activities) is crucial. This enables referencing, reporting, and sharing of experiences.

Continuous updating of systems and tools is necessary. It has become clear that certain tools (e.g., Form 12) were not capturing relevant information. The tools also need to incorporate relevant and current trends and developments.

NGOs should include planning and updating of their monitoring systems to ensure that monitoring resources are not wasted by duplicating activities for different donors. A comprehensive data collection tool can be used by the project, and information extracted for different donors. This is more feasible that reporting on information not needed by a specific donor or not capturing needed information. This is a task that is time consuming; time should therefore, be scheduled and a dedicated person assigned.

Input is crucial at all levels and can have serious (especially financial) implications for other organisations (e.g., if one monitoring officer submits information late, all the organisations in a network could feel the implications).

Financial implications are usually considered to be the most serious, while implications on planning and the influence on decision making is less prominent, but have serious detrimental long-term effects.

Mixed-methods approaches to monitoring and evaluation (using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies) are preferred. These capture unpredictable changes and add value in the form of narratives and other descriptive multi-media.

This reflection on monitoring the activities and performance of NGOs illustrates that monitoring and evaluation is essential; it is an investment, and is important on all levels.
Madri Jansen van Rensburg presently works with NGOs in the SADC region where she is involved in research, monitoring and evaluation and organisational development work. She enjoys multi-country and cross-cultural studies that use participatory methods and mixed methods approaches. She also does postgraduate student supervision and is a Research Methodology lecturer at the University of South Africa (Unisa).

REFERENCES


