

Monitoring and Evaluating Health Programmes: Key Features

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Introduction

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) is a new and evolving field. Its importance has been recognized at all levels of the health sector and there is an increasing demand for evidence-informed programming and accountability. It is now widely accepted that good governance, supported by monitoring and evaluation, is essential for the efficient management of health systems in the Caribbean.

According to Segone, there is consensus in the international community that M&E has a strategic role to play in informing the policy making processes (1). It also contributes to improving the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of health systems. Indeed, several converging priorities in the health sector, such as value for money, accountability and the achievement of health outcomes require sound analysis based on adequate information.

Demand is therefore growing for M&E and there is a clear benefit to utilizing the skills of researchers in the conduct of meaningful evaluation. Evaluation skills and experience are scarce in the Caribbean. The challenge is to expand the supply of evaluation know-how to include experts in research methods as a way of bolstering the field of M&E and ensuring its contribution to health systems development.

What is Monitoring and Evaluation?

Monitoring is a continuous set of activities that utilizes systematic collection of data on specific indicators to document the extent of progress toward the realization of established objectives. Evaluation is the determination of the value of a project, programme or policy. It is a process of knowledge production which is founded on the use of rigorous empirical inquiry.

Monitoring and evaluation of health systems is important to determine programme effectiveness in achieving

the intended outcomes for the intended users. It also helps to strengthen financial systems and accountability.

It is important to promote a culture of learning that is focussed on service improvement through evidence-informed practices. Monitoring and evaluation supports the promotion of successful initiatives or interventions. There are five main uses of the strategic information that M&E generates for the health sector – supporting performance-based budgeting, supporting health sector planning, providing evidence for the design of new policies and programmes, ensuring accountability, and providing evidence for health systems management.

Components of a Monitoring and Evaluation System

The World Bank's Global AIDS Monitoring and Evaluation Team has developed and promoted a very useful, systems thinking approach to support the understanding of the contribution of M&E (2). In this case, a 'system' is defined as a group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements forming a complex whole (3). 'Systems thinking' is about gaining insights into the whole by understanding the linkages and interactions between the elements that comprise the whole system (4). It follows that in a systems thinking approach, it is necessary to identify the components of the system (understanding that they are interrelated), as a means to describe the system, and ensure that each component is functional, as a means to ensuring that the overall system is functional. This thinking and application has led to the identification of twelve components of a functional M&E system. These components are used as the basis of a methodology for building M&E systems. The components comprise: 1) Structures with M&E functions, 2) Human capacity for M&E, 3) Partnerships to plan, coordinate and manage the M&E system; 4) National M&E plans, 5) Annual, costed M&E work plan; 6) Advocacy, communication and culture for M&E, 7) Routine HIV programme monitoring, 8) Surveys and surveillance, 9) National and sub-national HIV databases, 10) Supportive supervision and data auditing, 11) HIV evaluation and research agenda and 12) Data dissemination and use.

Institutional Arrangements for Monitoring and Evaluation

With greater emphasis on public sector effectiveness and transparency, there has been an increase in the demand and supply of quality M&E initiatives. There is a clear need to build and, in some cases, strengthen institutional arrangements for M&E. This requires attention and investment in training, system development and information frameworks if it is to result in an overall increase in effectiveness.

Creating high-level agencies devoted to M&E requires strengthened legal and regulatory frameworks at the systems level. Also critical are institutional incentives and enhanced use of business intelligence, benchmarking, target setting and quality data to ensure that the M&E information is integrated into the decision-making process.

What Have We Achieved?

Considerable progress has been made with the implementation of M&E systems. In recent times, we have noticed the establishment of M&E Units within Ministries of Health in the Caribbean. There has also been donor support for human resource capacity building in M&E through training and mentorship. Key regional strategic documents have supported strengthening M&E practice in the region. Caribbean Health Research Council (CHRC)/Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) has attracted funding from regional and international partners in support of its mandate to develop M&E capacity development.

Evaluation Research

Sometimes called programme evaluation, evaluation research is a form of applied research that is intended to have some real-world effect. It involves the use of scientific research methods to produce knowledge about policy and programme interventions. It has the potential to impact health at the population level. Evaluation research employs the use of surveys and experiments to answer evaluation questions.

There are several different types of evaluations, each of which can be conducted at a specific stage in a programme life cycle for a specific purpose. At the Development Phase, *Prospective Evaluations* are often conducted. This type of evaluation focusses on the likely outcomes of a proposed project or programme or policy and is expected to yield information on the expected benefits of an intervention. At the Implementation Phase, *Formative Evaluations* are conducted. These are evaluations of the ways in which a programme, policy or project is being implemented. The focus here is more on the efficiency of implementation than its effects. At the Effect Phase, we are concerned with the conduct of *Summative Evaluations*. The most popular type of evaluation, these are conducted at the end of an intervention to determine the extent to which a programme has achieved its desired results.

Evaluation Questions

There is no clear separating line between research and evaluation. Both must meet quality standards. Choices of scope, model, methods, process and degree of precision must be consistent with the questions that the evaluation or research is intending to answer. Many questions can be considered in planning an evaluation. As with research, they must be clearly defined in measurable ways. Evaluation questions can be descriptive, normative or cause and effect, and are usually aligned to the specific type of evaluation being conducted. Evaluation questions inform the evaluation design and methodology. Descriptive evaluation questions seek to describe what is or what exists while normative evaluation questions propose a comparison between what exists and an established standard. Cause and effect questions seek to examine the difference the programme made and set out to systematically measure its effect on the established beneficiary.

Evaluation Design

Evaluations can take many different shapes and are usually driven by the objective of the evaluation *ie* what we hope to get out of the exercise. Important considerations such as available human and financial resources as well as the timeline in which results must be made available are critical when developing the evaluation design. The evaluation method or type of study that will be undertaken is yet another key consideration. Particularly in the case of answering normative and cause and effect questions, it is important to select the design that will provide sound, credible answers to the evaluation questions. It is useful therefore to consider incorporating research designs such as single group pre/post-test, quasi experiment or randomized control trial.

What Has Been Evaluated in the Region?

Several evaluations have been conducted in the health sector, ranging from examinations of the sector's performance, the effectiveness of strategic plans, M&E system assessments and sundry others. Future efforts could benefit significantly from the input of experienced researchers working alongside evaluators. The Health Research Agenda for the Caribbean defines the Region's priorities. Significantly, the latter include evaluations in areas such as communicable diseases, prevention programmes and information systems. These present an excellent opportunity for collaboration between Caribbean researchers and evaluation practitioners.

Research and Evaluation: Are They Synonymous?

There has been a long standing debate on whether research is evaluation and *vice versa*. There is a feeling among the evaluation community that the work of the researcher is not as far-reaching as the evaluator. In this interpretation, research ends with the analysis of data, write-up of results and dissemination of results. Evaluators believe that they

move the process a step further to make policy and programmatic recommendations based on their findings. They see themselves as adding a significant element to the process – that of making a value judgment based on the results. Evaluators utilize findings to make recommendations on whether to continue a programme, policy or project as is, to make specific revisions to the intervention, or whether the project should be terminated; with clear evidence to support their position. If nothing else, this debate highlights the link between research and evaluation.

Conclusion

Appropriate use of monitoring and evaluation findings ensures that the planning of the health sector response is based on the best available evidence and guides on-going programme improvement. There is growing recognition of

the importance of M&E accompanied by some genuine efforts to build systems in the Caribbean. There is, however, still a great need for the institutionalization and conduct of more programme evaluations.

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