

# Monitoring

By Alexandra Miehlabradt and Hans Posthumus

February 2018

*Monitoring is a critical function to inform program improvements in interventions and strategies. However, programs often do not pay enough attention to ensure that staff are monitoring effectively and efficiently. This Practitioners' Note outlines tips to help programs implement good monitoring practices, ensuring it adds value for managers and helps to avoid common pitfalls. It also addresses issues in outsourcing monitoring and co-facilitators' monitoring.*

## 1 What is monitoring?

There are several definitions of “monitoring”. To “observe and check the progress or quality of (something) over a period of time”<sup>1</sup> and “supervising activities in progress to ensure they are on-course and on-schedule in meeting the objectives and performance targets”<sup>2</sup> are just two examples.

Most practitioners in private sector development and results measurement will refer to monitoring as ‘monitoring program and partner activities as well as the resulting changes at output and outcome levels’. For many practitioners, monitoring refers to ‘all monitoring activities that take place during the implementation period with the exception of baseline and end-line surveys’.

The purpose of monitoring is to understand if and how changes that are reflected in a results chain, take place during the intervention period and are likely to be sustainable. Monitoring is often done through periodic field observations, reviewing company records, conducting structured interviews and focus group discussions with partners and target beneficiaries to obtain their opinions.

## 2 Why is monitoring important?

Program teams develop business models and intervention plans, and the program teams and partners implement activities. Often there is a difference between the planned outputs and outcomes and what actually happens in the field. Appropriate monitoring should provide information on progress and the likelihood of sustainability and impact. There are basically four monitoring functions:

- **Improving the quality of the intervention**  
The program can influence the expected impact only at activity level. Beyond that level, outcomes and impacts are beyond their control. Paying sufficient attention to know if, and ensure that, activities are implemented in such a way that they are most effective, is crucial.
- **Understanding what works**  
Practitioners need to understand if changes take place, when changes take place, how changes take place and why changes take place. This then helps them to

<sup>1</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/monitor>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/monitoring.html>

understand and learn what works, what does not, and why. This helps to adjust interventions in such a way that they lead to more sustainable impact.

- **Avoiding surprises**

If the program only collects baseline information at the start of the intervention and only assesses the impact at the end of the intervention, then the program may be surprised by what they have achieved in terms of impact. That reduces the ability to manage the program's portfolio of interventions and sectors.

- **Helping to conduct impact assessments**

Learning from monitoring information helps to plan impact assessments. Not only when they should be done, but also if they should be done (why use resources for surveys if these will only confirm that there is limited or no impact?). Applying a tool like in-depth interviews informs practitioners which questions to ask and how to phrase them. It also provides information on how to assess impact, and how to sample target beneficiaries.

### 3 Why is monitoring challenging?

Let's take a historical perspective. Traditionally, monitoring was the responsibility of a Monitoring and Evaluation Unit. Often the focus was primarily on obtaining data related to inputs, activities and outputs for reporting purposes only. Too little attention was given to assess changes at the outcome and impact level. The credibility of the reported changes at these higher levels was questioned.

With experience, practitioners realized that they needed more reliable information on outcomes and impacts to improve their interventions and sector strategies. Programs put more emphasis and allocated more resources to improve the quality of impact assessments.

Practitioners also realized that implementation teams should be responsible for monitoring their interventions; they have a good understanding of the intervention, they can combine it with other tasks and they also need the information to manage their intervention.

An unforeseen result of this shift in resource allocation and monitoring responsibilities appears to be that less attention is given to ensure that monitoring – at all levels - is done appropriately. It is often assumed that implementation teams have the skills and time to monitor. Experience shows that this assumption is too optimistic. Consequently, managers don't get crucial information to manage the program, and resources are not used as effectively and as efficiently as they could be.

### 4 What are the pitfalls and what are the tips to address them?

There are several reasons why monitoring is often not functioning as effectively as it should be, but practitioners are developing ways to tackle the pitfalls and improve monitoring. A dozen of the typical pitfalls and tips how to address them are provided in the table below.

	Pitfalls	Tips
1	Implementation staff already have a high workload. They have plenty of responsibilities (design, negotiations,	Review the workload; don't just push tasks to implementation staff. Can they handle the number of interventions? How can results

	Pitfalls	Tips
	etc.) and monitoring is an additional task for them.	measurement specialists help them to monitor appropriately?
2	Monitoring is less of a priority to implementation staff. Changing routines is challenging. They monitor and report, but don't use the monitoring information	Management must show how monitoring is valuable: by asking for the information, by assessing it jointly, and by using it for decision making.
3	Implementation teams have limited experience and skills. Monitoring often isn't part of the recruitment profile and job description.	Train and coach them: how to sample, how many to sample, what questions to ask, how to ask questions, how to conduct an interview, how to process, how to analyze.
4	Monitoring activities aren't planned. Monitoring is not in the measurement plan, since it is assumed to be 'done daily as part of the job'. As such, it doesn't happen at all, or insufficiently.	Plan specific monitoring tasks, preferably time based, so it integrates easily with the operational quarterly plans: what, when and how to assess the changes.
5	Overambitious and intensive monitoring absorbs too many resources, e.g. planning special field trips to obtain nice-to-know facts and aiming to be too robust (e.g. sampling at random for a considerable number of respondents).	Keep it practical: integrate monitoring tasks into the operational plans but create additional time for them. Fore example, add an extra day to interview target beneficiaries when meeting with program partners in the field.
6	Processing information is challenging. Staff members find it difficult to analyze effectively and draw conclusions. They only collect data, but don't turn it into valuable information.	Discuss findings when staff members return to the office. Don't only ask for a report. Help them to process, analyze and conclude. What does this tell us? Don't take over, but coach them.
7	Implementation staff gather information and report it, but the program doesn't use the information for management decisions.	During intervention and sector review meetings, ask for information obtained through monitoring. When intervention changes are proposed, ask for facts (obtained from monitoring visits) to support the proposed changes.
8	Monitoring information is collected only from intervention partners at the outcome level. Monitoring of outcome level changes for target beneficiaries and other actors in the results chain is not collected.	Relying on partner information only is easy but risky. Practitioners can only gain a good understanding with data obtained in the field (from other actors, and from target beneficiaries).
9	Monitoring information is only collected from nearby and more prominent partners, actors and target beneficiaries. That may lead to a misinterpretation of the observed changes.	When planning takes place, ensure that this potential bias is addressed: make staff members aware of this pitfall and address it by balancing 'ease of collection' with 'using more resources' to obtain a good understanding of the changes for all target beneficiaries.

	Pitfalls	Tips
10	Monitoring plans are developed and implemented mechanically following a standard procedure across all interventions.	Assess what needs to be collected (and what not) and when and how that can be collected most effectively and efficiently. This implies monitoring plans are intervention-based, flexible and with variations depending on the context.
11	Staff gather and use the information, yet this information is not stored and thus not accessible and used for other tasks, e.g. for developing surveys or for designing new interventions.	Keep reporting to the minimum. These reports are for internal use, and don't need to be novels. Recording data, analyses and conclusions is enough. Ensure that these reports are filed per intervention so they are accessible and used, and not stored in a 'field trips folder' combining several interventions and used for other purposes.
12	The data collected and analyzed is biased. Staff are too engaged in the intervention and there is a risk that they see what they wish to see.	Management must emphasize that learning (to understand, to adjust, to improve) is more important and effective than reporting positive results. Bias is often not on purpose, but something all humans suffer from. Creating awareness is often enough to address the issue. Creating teams, composed of implementation staff and results measurement specialists, may reduce bias too.

## 5 Can monitoring be outsourced or not?

Some programs sometimes opt to outsource monitoring tasks. The reasons for outsourcing are often caused by:

- Too limited internal capacity: staff implementing the interventions already have a high workload,
- Too limited in-house expertise to conduct the more challenging monitoring tasks, e.g. sector level monitoring,
- A desire to obtain an independent view, assuming that internal monitoring is subjective.

There are significant risks in outsourcing the monitoring tasks completely.

- External monitors have less intervention-specific expertise than intervention managers.
- Implementation staff may not use the information provided by the external monitors.
- Outsourcing reduces flexibility and increases the need for coordination.
- External monitors may also be biased. They might also have an opinion and an agenda.

In some cases, it may make sense to outsource elements of monitoring. Sometimes simply because there is no access to the field (e.g. security restrictions). Sometimes because monitoring requires special skills that the program doesn't have. Sometimes because certain monitoring tasks are done sporadically, hence not justifying investments to build in-house capacity. This might be relevant when undertaking special studies, such as assessing 'wider changes in the market'. Programs that conduct small 'early signs of impact' studies

could outsource that. However, implementation staff will need to be involved in the design, fieldwork and analysis.

## 6 Can Co-facilitators monitor?

Some programs outsource part of their portfolio to local or international NGOs and consultancy firms to implement interventions. If these co-facilitators implement, they should also monitor their interventions. All the pitfalls and solutions for programs listed above are valid for them too. Key elements to address are:

- **Ownership: why do we monitor?** For learning and managing, less so for reporting. Given the contractual dependency, program management should be aware of the risk of co-facilitators assuming that monitoring needs to be done for reporting purposes only. Signaling a clear message to the co-facilitators from the start is crucial. Program management should also act as a role model; using the monitoring information to review interventions jointly with the co-facilitators.
- **Capacity: sufficient human resources?** Often, it is assumed that co-facilitators have sufficient human resources. However, it is not only the number of staff, it is also the skills, time and incentives that need to be there.
- **Systems: do they match?** Programs have their systems while co-facilitators have their own systems. It's important to assess where systems meet and where they clash to ensure that monitoring is done appropriately, not causing inefficiencies.

## 7 The Bottom Line

Monitoring provides crucial information and can be done with relatively few resources. Don't assume that it will be done, but first assess capacities and address the gaps. Ensure staff have the right skills, enough time and the right incentives. Emphasize that the key function is to understand, learn and improve design and implementation of the interventions. Use the information for decision making.

### Acknowledgements

In November 2017, the authors conducted a training workshop with advanced practitioners in results measurement for private sector development. Thanks are due to the Donor Committee for Enterprise Development, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for sponsoring both the workshop and these Practitioners' Notes. The content for the Practitioners' Notes emerged from the presentations and discussions during the workshop. The authors are grateful to all the participants, presenters and facilitators of the workshop for their willingness to share their challenges, insights and tips.

Alexandra Miehlsbradt [www.miehlsbradt.com](http://www.miehlsbradt.com)

Hans Posthumus [www.hposthumus.nl](http://www.hposthumus.nl)

*The views expressed in the Practitioners' Notes are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the DCED, SDC, DFAT or any of the programs represented at the workshop.*