

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) for Development in Peace-Precarious Situations

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ABSTRACT

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) supports evidence-based decision-making in program management through rigorous approaches to collecting and using quality data on program performance, results, and impact. The application of appropriate analytical tools in order to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of interventions in well-defined contexts over time contributes to our knowledge of the kinds of interventions that work best, and under which conditions. This paper focuses on the value of utilizing M&E information systems to improve both program impact and our understanding of how best to assist peaceful development in situations prone to violent conflict. Project M&E examples illustrate M&E strategies and tactics in peace-precarious situations, framing discussion of the utility of key M&E practices and approaches where stability and security are lacking. The final section suggests initial criteria for enhancing effective and cost-effective M&E that contributes more meaningfully to the success of development interventions in peace-precarious situations; the most critical of these is building flexible M&E systems that can respond appropriately to continue providing useful information under extreme uncertainty.

Monitoring and Evaluation for Development in Peace-Precarious Situations

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Introduction

Monitoring and evaluation, or M&E, is a sometimes maligned and frequently misunderstood field or discipline that has grown up on the fringes of international development work. M&E systems support development by generating relevant, accurate, and timely information that is used to improve program design and decision-making and thus enhance impact. While closely related to research, operations research, and the social sciences, functional M&E may neither practice nor aspire to emulate, exactly, the stringent scientific standards of more academic approaches. Certainly the strongest approaches and best practices of M&E overlap with academic social-science domains, but M&E purposes and techniques are usefully distinguished as a particular breed of information collection, processing, and use.

In short, M&E in the field of development supports making evidence-based decisions in the implementation of development interventions, or programs (projects), through rigorous but cost-effective approaches to collecting and using quality data on program performance, results, and impact. In conflict or post-conflict situations, or when supporting conflict resolution or related development efforts, the very volatility defining the peace-precarious environment requires interventions and related M&E activities to be carefully planned around avoiding unintended, undesired, and/or counterproductive side-effects. Given challenges that exist to the implementation of strong M&E systems even under normal development circumstances, consideration of special peace-precarious challenges broadens our understanding and adds to the potential to improve practices across the spectrum.

This paper focuses on M&E while presenting key issues that deserve careful consideration for any type of data collection, analysis, and information use supporting development in peace-precarious contexts. The first section discusses M&E concepts and distinctions important to the multidisciplinary goal of building knowledge about more and less successful approaches to development. Whether development is understood as economic prosperity, good governance and civil liberalization, improved health and other elements of social welfare, or simply as a level of minimal sustained peace to allow any or all of the preceding benefits, M&E contributes a valuable empirical perspective to enhance results.

The second part of the paper presents elements of M&E strategies, tactics, and results from a range of illustrative program or country cases. These cases suggest themes discussed further in the third section, regarding practices best suited for use in M&E systems to assess progress and program impact in peace-precarious situations. The concluding section also draws on the first two sections to suggest criteria to use in designing effective and efficient M&E approaches that will help us build knowledge about peace-building and development even under violently stressful conditions.

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M&E of peace-precarious interventions

Clarification of M&E as a discipline

Monitoring and evaluation at its best brings crucial empirical evidence to bear – directly, immediately, and within the context of the intervention – on assessments of ineffective or inefficient versus more effective or efficient program design, implementation, performance, and achievement. At the same time, program M&E is not merely different jargon for program management, but a distinct undertaking: objective and representative empirical evidence generated through M&E systems is grist for interpretation by implementers in program management systems. Interpretation of M&E evidence is one factor weighed in the balance when judging strategic and tactical decisions that may, however, be equally or more strongly influenced by other factors and dynamics (politics, funding, competing goals, timelines) influencing perceptions of development opportunities and constraints.

Research or academic evaluation studies differ from program M&E along many dimensions. These differences are generally distinctions of degree, albeit sometimes of kind. Perhaps the most significant difference between M&E practiced to support development or relief programs and social science research practiced to generalize knowledge or theoretical understanding is the frequent absence in M&E strategies or systems of scientific or even quasi-experimental control groups.² Including non-intervention areas, control groups, or adequately strong (valid and reliable) data on confounding factors will, in most cases, not occur in a program context for bottom-line budgetary reasons. In the unusual case where financial resource constraints do not present an insurmountable obstacle, either human capacity (trained skills and experience) or time to collect, analyze, and use the appropriate spectrum of information to achieve or approximate scientific rigor will typically be lacking.

In other instances the scope of an intervention will make selection of and data collection with respect to non-intervention populations or areas infeasible or impossible for pragmatic reasons. Randomized selection of program beneficiaries would in most cases be precluded for ethical reasons, certainly where populations are in dire need and/or entire systems need life-saving assistance or other development support – conditions that are likely to prevail often precisely where peace-precarious development interventions are implemented. While various strategies may be employed to approximate controls for confounding factors, the field realities are such that most attempts fall egregiously short, even in program evaluation efforts.³ These realities particularly affect disaster assistance, humanitarian relief, and other intervention types characteristic of development work in peace-precarious contexts.

M&E as a discipline must favor pragmatism, for instance by explicitly recognizing resource constraints that exist in development assistance programming, and practical ramifications of the challenges. State of the art tools and methods in the social sciences, for instance, ideally should inform program M&E design and implementation, but in pragmatic terms no efficient full-scale program can responsibly allocate resources adequate to support social-science-caliber research.⁴ Even were resources – financial, human, time and attention – doubled, or tripled, ethical arguments must affect their allocation. Donors, beneficiaries, and

² Beyond issues discussed in Bollen et al., 2005, resource constraints on program M&E nearly always preclude data collection outside of program areas, with the exception of national-level indicators that may not be susceptible to appropriate disaggregation.

³ Adamchak et al., 2004, while noting deficiencies of program evaluation as currently practiced, also implicitly argues that rigorous controls should not be part of program evaluation (pp 36-37). See also Weber 2004.

⁴ Pilot programs are in a different category but still face research resource constraints, and other challenges. The threshold of “good enough” tends to be the operational criterion for data.

stakeholders (including implementers themselves) would likely consider it morally dubious or irresponsible to expend an extraordinary proportion of those resources specifically to achieve statistically significant or rigorously replicable results. Field perceptions tend to be dominated by those whose experience suggests that less precise, less costly data provides enough information quickly enough to fine-tune program design and implementation enough to prove/improve program impact. Those with the strongest interest and motivation to make the most difference in a peace-precarious situation may often be the most resistant to devoting resources to research seeking the most impeccable scientific proof of what works, seeing it as activity in lieu of devoting resources to the urgent needs of the assisted population.

Ongoing research nonetheless plays a pivotal role in testing and validating lessons learned through experience in program M&E. It is vital that program M&E be undertaken as seriously and scientifically as resources allow, in order to contribute most efficiently to the pursuit of stronger conclusions pertaining to development work through additional study and social science evaluation. While being realistic about the constraints inherent in the context in which M&E experts must make their findings, it is equally vital to avoid dismissing M&E-type findings on grounds that they may seem insufficiently “scientific”. M&E results represent the most current, most field-based realities on which we may have any data at all, and it behooves the development community to strengthen and encourage sound M&E systems explicitly, in all program efforts and under all circumstances – even difficult peace-precarious ones.

While the international community has a clear interest in building a scientifically-sound, empirical knowledge base regarding more, and less, effective and efficient strategies and activities to resolve societal and intracommunal conflicts nonviolently, that interest must at the same time be weighed against quick responses to immediate crises and related human needs. In development work, an imperfect, or imperfectly-tested, approach whose application can be expedited will usually trump the idea of a more theoretically-grounded approach that would require more time and draw more resources away from tasks directly contributing to implementation and impact. The long-term scientific perspective on using empirical data to test hypotheses and theories behind interventions to build knowledge is compelling, when viewed from that perspective, but it is not often feasible or appropriate to pursue in the context of providing development assistance on the ground.

The following summary table presents some key differences between research and program M&E strategies and tactics.⁵

⁵ See also the discussion in Coffman, 2003/2004.

Table 1. Clarification of M&E as a pragmatic field discipline

	Research approaches	M&E approaches
Dependent variable	Determined in the context of the scholarly community, with debate pertinent to building meaningful definitions of key terms	Determined in the context of stakeholders' definitions of intervention success, with debate pertinent to building consensus around defined parameters or dimensions
Timeframe for data collection & analysis	Indeterminate, depends on funding and research design	Implementation schedule takes priority over M&E design and data requirements/preferences
Expected nature of findings	<p>a. Hypotheses tested against best-quality evidence to reach conclusions with known confidence intervals</p> <p>b. Additional or anomalous data are examined and considered in terms of their utility for correcting, refining, extending the model or theory</p>	<p>a. Causal assumptions linking intervention activities and objectives tested against results (indicators) to refine tentative judgments in an ongoing fashion</p> <p>b. Unexpected information and data are incorporated into the overall assessment of program impact, contextual influences, and unintended consequences</p>
Expected use of results	Empirical data informs probabilistic or predictive models/theories to increase understanding or indirectly influence social, political, and economic decision-making	Empirical data informs value judgments and intervention (program) management / action
Timeframe for use of results	Indeterminate, depends on nature of conclusions, publications, colleague responses, and other factors	As quickly as reasonable in order to inform programmatic decisions re: implementation for improved impact
Priority audience for conclusions	<p>a. Other academics and researchers in the same or related fields</p> <p>b. Professional counterparts, professional associations</p> <p>c. Policymakers and employers</p>	<p>a. Funder and other donors in same and related fields, regions, and/or using same or related development approaches in interventions</p> <p>b. Colleagues (other program implementers) in same or related fields, regions, and/or using same/related approaches in development interventions</p>
Further dissemination of conclusions	a. Scholarly and policy-oriented publications; peer citation or debate	<p>a. Narrow, typically targets donor and host country audiences; proprietary and/or sensitive information excluded from more public dissemination</p> <p>b. Constrained by budget; may require overhead or corporate resources and investment</p>

M&E especially for peace-precarious situations

The special constraints and challenges of implementing development interventions where political, economic, and/or social disputes are prone to lead to violent conflict are myriad. No activity can be undertaken without investing in serious analysis of known and suspected socio-political/economic tensions, undercurrents, and potential ramifications of any changes in the dynamics that successful interventions by definition would entail. This factor alone serves to complicate implementation of every task significantly, and inhibits innovation along all dimensions on a regular if not systematic basis. Monitoring and evaluation is likewise constrained and challenged where violent conflict perpetually looms, since information – even or especially accurate information – in such circumstances may often be used by social, political, and/or economic entrepreneurs with their own interests and agendas in mind. Certainly there will be actors in peace-precarious situations who do not necessarily understand their best options to lie exclusively in peace-promoting directions; thus, M&E systems must be not only originally designed but continually implemented and updated in ways that minimize potential abuse of information in these volatile arenas.

Normal challenges to implementing good program M&E, which is defined by strong systems that sustainably support the collection and analysis of quality data for use in making decisions, include:

- limited financial resources for skilled M&E staff, activities, and information management
- limited local capacity to support sustainable development of evidence-based decision-making structures and processes
- limited opportunity to allow adequate passage of time for appropriate measurement of desired effects (statistically 'rare' events such as subpopulation or disease-specific mortality rates, slow-changing impact targets such as behavior or systems change, etc.)

In a peace-precarious context, all of the challenges above will be complicated by greater uncertainty. In addition, other factors that typically can reasonably be assumed to be held relatively constant (stable within predictable parameters) when projects are implemented in normal development settings, will instead unpredictably change in a conflict, post-conflict, or fragile state (peace-precarious) setting. In such settings, change may be expected, but perhaps dramatically unpredictable will be its sources, directions, rates, sequences, and interacting effects on subsequent patterns of changes, often triggering new circumstances that may shape or catalyze further changes in related or parallel systems. Shifting or transitional institutions may stabilize from time to time, yet achievement of any semi-stable, semi-secure equilibrium cannot be known until some indeterminate time after it has been reached.

Further costs are added where physical security of the program team has to be protected, and these additional expenses can be significant. Activities and their results are impeded if security concerns limit activity, movement, and access to stakeholders or beneficiaries. Costs are added, and results impaired, when implementation strategies and plans must be constantly reworked due to either security risks or substantial changes in critical political or other factors. Costs are added when government counterparts change or entire institutions and operations are restructured during times of political and other transition. All of these additional costs further cut into resources that might otherwise be used to design and implement more complete and robust M&E systems which could provide more valuable support in analyzing program results, generating relevant evidence to use in fine-tuning activities, implementation strategies, and associated resource allocations toward enhancing the overall impact of the intervention.

Learning by doing: Challenges affecting M&E systems

This section presents elements of M&E strategies, tactics, trade-offs, and results from a range of illustrative program or country project cases in order to examine the ramifications of particular M&E practices as they have been planned or improvised in peace-precarious situations. These examples illustrate salient issues and concerns central to M&E theory and methods through discussing selected empirical practices in development interventions operating in latent or manifest conflict situations⁶ in recent years. As one would expect, varying challenges that are posed for program implementation by different types and dimensions of peace-precarious situations tend to highlight different implications for M&E systems or activities associated with those interventions. At the same time, common threads across the selected case topics that follow include the central role of flexibility as an M&E asset in peace-precarious situation, with concomitant cost and quality implications that depend more unpredictably on time- and context-specific idiosyncrasies.

Nepal: Security challenges to M&E baselines and impact measurement

The Maternal and Neonatal Health (MNH) Program worked in Nepal 1999-2003, primarily to support Government of Nepal (GoN) efforts to promote MNH through access to and use of quality health care services for mothers and newborns.⁷ A key intervention promoted seeking, reaching, and receiving MNH care by working with the GoN promoting SUMATA (care, share, prepare), an education and behavior change campaign focused on identifying dangers, increasing popular awareness of the potentially dire consequences of delays, and promoting related messages to encourage timely care-seeking.⁸ During the implementation period, however, dangers posed to civilians and development workers by Nepal's Maoist insurgency, among other destabilizing events, forced program implementers to re-target most of their planned activities from the original rural areas (where the baseline was collected) to others, and to design and implement previously unplanned activities that targeted urban populations instead. In the end, the baseline situational analysis and the follow-up survey to assess impact had only four of nine areas in common, and many activities had not been fully implemented for methodologically desirable lengths of time.

While the MNH Program's M&E system for Nepal can be commended for including a strong attempt to gauge program impact, including funding and implementation of two population-based surveys for analysis, the precarious security situation created by Maoist violence necessitated significant alterations in country program strategy and related implementation of a mix of planned and unplanned activities. Nor did the M&E plan and survey design remain static, which also signifies an appropriately responsive M&E system, but both instead were adapted flexibly to the shifting implementation landscape. The appropriate alteration in the sampling frames from the originally targeted and only rural areas to new areas both rural and urban, however, unavoidably constrains confidence in and generalizability of the survey results. The limited size of the comparable samples (and related shrinkage of subset significance) limits the meaningfulness of interpreting the survey results.

Challenges to security situations in countries with intermittent outbreaks of violent conflict require development programs to redesign, reorganize, or redeploy resources – across a new array of activities, targeting different beneficiaries, and/or reaching less threatening or less threatened areas or populations. M&E is affected when programs do not roll out as

⁶ Paffenholz and Reychler, 2005.

⁷ MNH Program (implemented by JHPIEGO Corporation in collaboration with JHU/CCP, CEDPA, and PATH) was a five-year USAID-funded global initiative focused on improving maternal and newborn survival and health.

⁸ Sood et al., 2004.

planned, since changes will mean existing baselines may no longer be relevant at the end of the project, and relevant retrospective baselines usually will not be available. Measurement of impact becomes less rigorous even where estimation may be feasible. Even estimated impact measurement can be impossible where (a) program roll-out is significantly delayed or impaired by security concerns; (b) data collection is significantly delayed or otherwise impeded at baseline, mid-term, or final scheduled times; or (c) the program must take on significantly different concerns due to humanitarian and/or other emergency assistance needs overtaking prior design targets.

Iraq: Security challenges to M&E data collection

The Iraq Local Governance Project (LGP) began operations in 2003, primarily focused on helping stabilize new/emerging local governing institutions and supporting them to develop and operate more transparently and effectively.⁹ In its first two years, LGP worked with Coalition Provisional Authorities, Multinational Forces in Iraq (MNFI), and other Coalition and US government agencies to support democratization and strengthen municipal services through improved local governance.¹⁰ A crucial M&E activity focusing on determining project impact involved conducting a series of Quality of Life (QoL) surveys to collect and quickly analyze empirical data on Iraqi citizens' attitudes and experiences with local government leaders and service delivery through this period. QoL surveys were implemented between October 2003 and January 2005, with data analysis continuing for some months after the 30 January 2005 elections to choose representatives to the Transitional National Assembly and governorate councils.¹¹

Peace-precarious challenges complicating implementation of all of the QoL surveys included low-intensity but deadly conflict pitting the MNFI and their Iraqi military and police allies against Iraqi and foreign resistance. The intensity of such conflict increased from November 2003 onward. An increasing number of attacks on Iraqis working for the Coalition, and Iraqi and foreign contractors, drastically multiplied the risks faced by LGP staff and QoL survey teams. LGP's M&E team tried to mitigate both the risk exposure of data collectors and any infringement on data quality in many ways, including: technical oversight of instrument development and the careful training of culturally and ethnically diverse enumerators, ongoing capacity development with the local firm implementing the field work, close field supervision, and data quality assurance exercised as closely as possible to the point and time of data collection in the field and during all phases. Nonetheless, particular challenges to QoL implementation in the post-totalitarian environment of 2003-2005 included:

- Numerous checkpoints and searches extending travel times (periods of exposure to risk) and related costs and stress of data collection;
- Unstable and unreliable interregional administrative barriers (e.g. necessity of obtaining special permits to work in certain areas; challenges to officially-issued permits);
- Heightened sensitivity of respondents with respect to personal questions in the survey;
- Heightened suspicions of respondents about enumerator motivations and allegiances; and
- Detention, beatings, and death threats for one survey team (third QoL), along with confiscation of their completed questionnaires.

Violence and threats of violence directed at a project team or M&E data collectors raise the stakes of ascertaining intervention results appreciably. Development programs working under these kinds of challenges must devote more resources to cover increased data

⁹ Implemented by RTI and funded by USAID.

¹⁰ Currently, the follow-on (Iraq Strengthening Local and Provincial Governance) works with USG, Coalition, and sovereign Iraqi counterparts.

¹¹ Much of the information in this section draws on work presented in Elkins et al., 2005.

collection costs, as noted above. Pressure to generate and share survey data exceptionally quickly can limit a project's use of statistical methodologies that otherwise might strengthen confidence in survey results through allowing greater scientific rigor to support related inferences. In an ongoing or intermittent threat situation, however, reporting to the donor and incorporating information rapidly into strengthening the intervention's strategic design and tactics may take precedence, so survey data may be reported and used without weights and without imputing missing data. At the same time, such data are unique and will likely be highly valued not only by the donor but by all stakeholders, and may be used to recalibrate not just program strategy and implementation, but also broader policies in some instances.

Iraq: Security challenges to achievement of M&E results

The Training Model Primary Providers (TMPP) project has been working in collaboration with the Iraqi Ministry of Health (MoH) since 2005. Its focus is strengthening MoH systems and capacity to design and implement a professional system to assure quality in primary health care (PHC) services, including sustainable strategies supporting quality in PHC training and facility management.¹² Security challenges have inhibited some of the planned MoH and TMPP activities and constrained feasible progress, principally with respect to efforts to build decentralized capacity toward strengthening staff and operations at MoH governorate levels, improving facility-based information systems and data use, and strengthening access to and informed use of health information that supports improved decision-making at all levels. Challenges are not always direct: for instance, security concerns have contributed to delays in the construction of a network of new PHC centers all around the country. Construction delays have hindered achievement of TMPP goals to assist the MoH to staff and manage those new facilities with health care providers and managers whose capacity has been augmented through joint TMPP/MoH efforts. Lowering the risks of operating in the peace-precarious environment through defensive measures also adds costs directly.¹³

The TMPP experience highlights an additional barrier to successful development efforts in peace-precarious situations: staff recruitment and retention. While many who work in development or humanitarian fields must routinely accept challenges large and small that others might find daunting to consider, peace-precarious projects must draw from a still more limited pool of applicants. While this is true of any number of environments – Kosovo, Pakistan, Nigeria, Colombia – when project implementation also faces a shifting scope that requires recruiting new or additional staff very quickly, the human resource limitations can severely constrain the feasible set of activities to implement, and thus the achievement of dependent results. Retention of staff is another challenge, since even those willing to work in peace-precarious situations may not be able to gauge their personal tolerance accurately when it comes to the special strains of working in a peace-precarious area. Constant low-level stress with intermittent outbreaks of violence can lead to high and costly turnover.

Turning to local recruitment versus expatriate contracts often may not increase the labor pool significantly, given that peace-precarious situations typically include violence-prone local groups in explicit conflict over social, political, and economic goods and services. It can be dangerous, even life-threatening, for locals to work with politically-charged development efforts where other factions are violently resisting the efforts or implications of the changes (e.g., democratization) targeted by the project. As with expatriates, local staff retention will

¹² Implemented in Iraq since 2005 by RTI in partnership with IntraHealth International, and funded by USAID.

¹³ For further on this issue and discussion of other challenges of development work in peace-precarious situations, see http://www.ibiblio.org/wunc_archives/sot/index.php?p=152 (archive program of The State of Things, "RTI in Iraq", broadcast date 26 Jan 2005).

be an issue that adds costs and can impede implementation or results. These impediments can particularly limit the project's ability to implement a robust and useful M&E system, because of the technical M&E skills and experience required to work well in volatile and/or threatening circumstances while not only the project's implementation evolves but its staff and related capacities fluctuate.

Challenges to implementation of activities in countries with sustained low-level conflict thus include increased costs on many different levels: constantly readjusting implementation plans and associated design, logistics, and local partnerships, and needing to recruit and mobilize, and retain, personnel with appropriate skills and capacity to lead or assist in the evolving scope of work. Pressures to become ever more flexible simultaneously demand equal or greater flexibility and repeated cycles of adjustment in M&E systems (whose operations likewise depend on recruiting and retaining appropriate staff) and targets. M&E to measure results of a project aiming to strengthen management capacity and information systems must also quite carefully examine data records or systems that might be sensitive or misused to target individuals or groups for reprisals, should the political context shift or disintegrate unfortunately.

Rwanda: Stability challenges to M&E of systems and capacity

The Government of Rwanda (GoR) Ministry of Health (MINISANTE) requested assessment of health management information systems (HMIS) in Rwanda in 2005, to analyze existing HMIS structures and processes operating throughout the health sector toward improving data management, data validity and reliability, and health care planning and decision-making at all levels.¹⁴ While not project M&E per se, this assessment is essentially an M&E activity. The focus of the six-month assessment activity is to integrate and analyze data collected on existing health information systems from a representative sampling of service delivery points, or facilities, with information gathered from other sources including central government agencies, donor organizations, and the private sector. The activity is designed to build on previous relevant analyses with more limited scopes or goals to capture an accurate snapshot of the current system, present a gaps analysis of that snapshot vis-à-vis HMIS best practices, and recommend strategies that could be pursued to strengthen Rwanda's information systems in priority action areas.

Use of routine health information forms a critical backbone of decision support systems and appropriate health policies. A national HMIS, for instance, should collect, integrate, and produce performance indicators – financial, operational, and related to governance – that help stakeholders throughout the health sector plan and take appropriate action. Quality data must be collected, processed and transformed, communicated and used to inform decisions on resource allocations, policies, staffing, service delivery, supportive supervision, and additional context relevant to health outcomes. Processes that need to be iterated and institutionalized to strengthen health information systems include: (1) determining stakeholders' information needs; (2) assessing current capacities to manage and use information, including specific indicators; (3) building or supporting capacity and data quality; and (4) building or supporting capacity to interpret and use information in making decisions. In the Rwandan context, strategies to improve the integration or at least facilitate coordination of HIV/AIDS and other health information systems in ways that strengthen the health system overall also must be addressed.

¹⁴ Implemented by RTI and funded through the Twubakane Decentralization and Health Project (itself funded by USAID and implemented by IntraHealth in partnership with RTI and Tulane University), The (US) President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), and the USAID Mission in Rwanda.

Challenging in and of itself, successful HMIS assessment is further complicated by the changing landscape in which it must be accomplished. During the six-month period, the GoR has scheduled, postponed, and held local elections; reorganized administrative districts (120) and health districts (33) into a new district system (30), while aiming to phase out the provincial level altogether; and, as part of ongoing decentralization, reduced central Ministry staff to approximately 25 or 20 persons (inclusive of administrative and support staff) each, approximately a two-thirds' cut for the Ministry of Health. District health teams must be a part of a health information system, yet their roles are unlikely to stabilize before the assessment activity ends. Composition of the teams is currently not entirely clear; not all of the new districts contain district-level hospitals, while others include several. In other words, the "snapshot" to be analyzed to identify system strengthening strategies will be of an information system whose structures and processes are very much in flux.

Challenges to the assessment of a moving system, then, include capturing the significance of changes to operational structures, internal decision-making or implementing bodies, and the processes for information flows and use at various levels of responsibility throughout the health sector. M&E activities are also affected when counterparts change, such as through mass reorganization of the public sector. Changing counterparts often entail changing demands for, and changes in capacity to absorb and use, information at the different levels according to new or different strategies promoted by the new or reduced set of key stakeholders, especially since reorganization will also typically alter group dynamics and realign political interests. In addition, HMIS assessments most often must be based on spot checks and qualitative cross-referencing of selected results from targeted data collection, rather than a scientific survey sample. In fact the unscientific nature of the sample is typical of most facility-based data collection, for pragmatic and program-based reasons including inadequate time, capacity, and funding to cover a methodologically sophisticated sample of all levels, locations, sizes, client loads, and other relevant criteria defining the supply side of health services. Constraints on the representativeness of the selected sample will be exacerbated where the facility system itself is part of ongoing reorganizations.

Ukraine: Stability supported through local ownership of M&E systems

The Association of Ukrainian Cities (AUC)¹⁵ is a nonpartisan voluntary society that connects Ukraine's government officials at municipal, city, and village levels across the country to encourage transparency and citizen participation. The AUC's transparent use of information includes information strategies targeting city, government, and media audiences to promote local democratic and economic development and providing other information and communication resources for its members. The Dissemination of Regional Offices for the AUC project operated from 2000 through 2003, and was designed to support related improvements in local governance capacity, local authority and resources, and citizen participation through an integrated program of activities balancing central, regional, and local efforts building on approaches to sharing and using information used in the AUC.¹⁶

Key project goals were to improve member services and communications among member cities, and strengthen AUC members' capacity to analyze positions based on empirical evidence, and thus to advocate more effectively in the interests of local self-government. The Regional Offices project explicitly undertook M&E that would be transparent and widely shared, with content relevant to achievement of activity results and current and historical results available in some detail, the goal being to use information about results in ongoing

¹⁵ <http://www.auc.org.ua/>

¹⁶ Implemented by RTI and funded by USAID.

project decisions. M&E results information was integrated into the AUC website, AUC Dialog: The Voice and Experience of Ukrainian Cities.¹⁷

This website proved a powerful tool in improving communication among the nearly 400 AUC member cities and towns, and notably facilitated sharing information and results during the six weeks or so in late 2004 known as the Orange Revolution. While the AUC maintained a neutral stance throughout, the AUC Dialogue was used by Ukrainian municipal officials to provide uncensored reports that effectively reached a national audience. Municipalities posted their councils' protests against the official election results, and reported on local demonstrations, for example, while councils or officials supporting the results also used the forum to publish their perspectives on events.¹⁸

This case shows that overcoming challenges to building strong and effective M&E systems can yield unanticipated benefits due to the spillover of transparency, initiative, and capacity to communicate effectively. While the link to M&E is not direct, key factors in the use of the website during the Orange Revolution seem to include the high degree of local ownership and pre-existing wide engagement in the communication of results and other information. Web access was transformed into a medium to share critical evidence for decision-making through this period of intense political uncertainty, providing a neutral forum for officials to communicate indicators of local conditions and improve their understanding of events or developments as they occurred around the country. Many historical examples exist of peace-precarious situations being fanned into violence by irresponsible use and spread of dubious, rumored, or selective and exaggerated information, but the AUC example suggests that dangerously precarious situations can also be defused where local ownership of shared information and communication systems has built mutual respect for the value of using information in decision-making by communicating empirical data or facts responsibly.

¹⁷ See also Darcy 2006.

¹⁸ <http://www.rti.org/newsletters/cid/2005aug-sep/>

The way forward

The cases discussed above illustrate challenges to building and maintaining strong or effective M&E systems when the intervention itself is operating in a peace-precarious situation. Not only are typical constraints on “last hired, first fired” M&E intensified, but additional pressures will come to bear on the efficacy of the systems, the quality of the data, the timeliness of collection and turnaround, and the salience of M&E evidence pertaining to performance and results when balanced against other imperatives shaping program decisions.

Each peace-precarious situation has its own idiosyncratic challenges, and each type of program (targets, scope and length, funding, and leadership) can imply differing strengths, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities. Peace-precarious situations raise multidimensional issues of uncertainty and require contingency planning and strategies that increase costs or the level of investments needed in time, skills, and other resources to address both known and changing information needs flexibly but appropriately. What criteria, then, should be used to select effective and efficient M&E approaches that can most helpfully build knowledge about peace-building and development interventions even under violently stressful conditions?

Well-designed M&E systems support fact-based assessments of incremental or overall intervention effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, accountability, and other defined dimensions of program success. M&E systems contribute to success through generation and use of valid and reliable data on intervention performance and results. Best use of that data is to better inform management and implementation decisions during the life of the intervention, in ways that maximize impact and probabilities of sustained change. Implications of the special challenges posed to implementing quality M&E in environments particularly susceptible to socio-political turmoil and/or violent conflict highlight some of the features that ideally would be present in almost any strong M&E system, but have increased salience in peace-precarious situations.

1. Flexible approaches including use of quantitative and qualitative data. One reason the MNH Program was able to discuss its population-based survey data in a meaningful context was a field approach of gathering information beyond survey responses that informed interpretation of the results. Likewise for the Rwanda HMIS Assessment, where interpretation of the moving snapshot can only occur through triangulation of all available information in context. The best example may be the TMPP data collection plan for evaluation of project impact. The original plan is now infeasible, since it relied on a series of country-wide assessments sampling quality of care across all of the trained staff at the planned new PHC centers. Given the few new centers in place so far, the new more tightly focused strategy includes provider observation but also draws on qualitative feedback collected through focus groups and in-depth interviews to better understand the project's impact under current realities.
2. Rapid or rotating calendar of data collection activities. Staking all analysis of a project's results, thus relative success or failure, on end-of-project data collection is a very bad risk when operating in a peace-precarious situation. The MNH Program case and TMPP suggest the strength of a strategy that diversifies a project's data portfolio and stays creative about appropriate data collection to meet stakeholder information needs. The Rwandan HMIS Assessment further suggests that peace-precarious activities sometimes need information about the dynamically changing as well as the static features of the environment. Certainly the most important results targeted by any peace-precarious intervention often need to be measured by design through a multiplicity of methods and

perspectives, in part because most of the data collected in these environments will tend to be noisy and thus will need to be interpreted quite cautiously.

3. Focus on dialogue about information use and ongoing feedback on M&E information's usefulness. Static M&E systems focused on reporting to meet the contractual obligations of the implementing project will tend to be out-of-date and useless in most peace-precarious situations within a predictably short time after their finalization. Intervention implementation will surely require adjustment, as strongly demonstrated in the Iraq TMPP and MNH Program cases and, where originally planned indicators and other measures no longer apply, it is absolutely essential to negotiate redesign or at least healthy tweaking of the M&E plan with relevant stakeholders. If that proves impossible, at the very least the project must redesign internally in order to track and understand its own progress and results, or lack thereof, to inform its own management's ongoing decisions. Allowing and valuing local innovation based on stakeholder perceptions of needed information, use, and dissemination or feedback, as in the Ukraine, is one of the most effective routes to fostering sustainable use of information, which in turn is crucial for quality assurance and for development efforts to be sustained in local hands after the project's end.
4. Integration of the field perspective in M&E system design. Methodological social-science purity has great value in secondary testing of hypotheses and accumulating generalized or at least potentially generalizable theories. Greater weight, however, must be given to the active value and use of "good enough" data for field-oriented decision-making when designing, implementing, and adjusting any intervention's M&E system. That priority is especially helpful where the project itself operates without *ceteris paribus* confidence in its environment. Both Iraq projects provide evidence of the cruciality of giving primacy to information that is of value on-the-spot, since in many or all peace-precarious situations the only certainty may be that rapid decisions will need to be made under uncertainty, and such decisions will benefit substantially from being based on the best available and most relevant empirical evidence.
5. Strategic selection of indicators and metrics. While the above discussion has not gone into detail regarding M&E indicators, these are key elements of any M&E system tracking progress and results for a development intervention. To meet the information needs of projects operating within the constraints of peace-precarious uncertainties, indicators should be: (a) narrow, (b) redundant, (c) triangulated, and (d) designed to be cautiously interpreted. In addition, a project's portfolio of data sources is most robust in a peace-precarious situation when it has been consciously diversified. This approach to data systems and the information drawn from them can minimize the risk of completing a highly challenging intervention under the most difficult circumstances without having significant measurable results that shed empirical light on the meaning of the effort and impact of the resources invested.

Conflict situations present specific challenges for designing and implementing useful M&E strategies, but lessons may be drawn from decades of M&E experience. Relevant experience includes sound M&E systems operating under more stable or secure conditions but also the more diverse and creative M&E systems that may be found in more recent experience as development interventions continue to unroll under unstable and insecure conditions which may seem endemic to parts of the world today. Well-designed M&E systems operate apart from hands-on program management and supervision systems because their goal is simply to ensure that the most relevant information is collected, analyzed, shared, and used in a timely fashion. Well-designed M&E systems, under any conditions, support improved program impact when program decision-makers appropriately interpret and use empirical

M&E information to form more accurate understandings of program strengths and weaknesses through data on performance and results. M&E information used thus enables managers to improve the efficiency of resource allocations and otherwise tweak activity design and processes during the intervention.

How are M&E systems and project decision-making processes complicated by peace-precious situations? Virtually in every way, along every dimension. Below is a sample of issues typical of required M&E flexibility under unstable or insecure conditions:

- data is less reliable, lowering confidence in measured values
- context is constantly subject to change, raising uncertainty in interpretation of measured values
- activity targets must shift in degree or orientation, necessitating renegotiation with donors and other stakeholders
- program must adapt flexibly to changing context and/or security constraints, raising questions about the continued appropriateness of previous M&E plan
- new information is needed more urgently, raising costs of M&E implementation
- goalposts must move or whole game may change, invalidating baselines and/or requiring comprehensive overhaul of M&E strategy
- stakes are higher, rewards are more fleeting, and systematic M&E less feasible

Volatility shapes the experiences of program implementers, counterparts, collaborators, and beneficiaries, which magnifies uncertainty in decision-making and thus multiplies related challenges to M&E, considerable even in the best of development circumstances. The critical role M&E systems can and should play in providing time-sensitive feedback based on quality data to helpfully constrain decision-making uncertainty deserves special emphasis where circumstances do not include personal security or political stability.

Shifting situations require flexible systems, and flexible but effective M&E systems require ownership that is broad, information is transparent, and feedback is rapid, targeted, and solution-oriented. Decision support systems can be strengthened through “state of the art” M&E approaches developed in well-defined intervention areas, such as health, and to some extent education and governance. Area-specific M&E approaches also should be mined for strategies and tactics of relevance for improving the M&E of complex and multidimensional programs, which is often the nature of interventions in peace-precious situations. Such cross-fertilization within the practice of M&E for development is essential for building M&E systems that can better contribute to the success of interventions in particularly contentious situations, including almost all kinds of interventions in newly-emerging states, new democracies, conflict arenas, and post-conflict societies.

While field M&E supporting development efforts uses rigorous but cost-effective approaches to collect and use quality data to use program performance, results, and impact, its role is even more critical in peace-precious situations. The significance of maintaining records of objective and representative data on process and outcomes is magnified when the threat of violence between or within groups looms large. The very volatility defining the peace-precious environment requires that interventions and related M&E activities invest extra levels of effort to raise the standard for data quality and efficient, effective feedback and use of that information in a timely fashion to inform decision-makers and stakeholders. Adequate staff, skills, and supplemental resources must also support M&E contingency planning in the field in order to assure ongoing M&E operations even in conditions of inherent uncertainty encompassing basic physical security and structural political stability.

At the same time, program examples also illustrate that flexibility is a virtue and integrating M&E efforts into the local context beyond the project itself may offer an arena for valuable

development. Investing in meaningful M&E systems strengthening – local capacity to implement quality data collection and use relevant and timely evidence in decision-making – may positively affect a peace-precarious situation beyond the scope of the intervention. Making sure to take advantage of every opportunity throughout the life of a project to use and build appreciation for quality M&E information, instead of waiting for an uncertain end, is an optimal strategy for building locally-appropriate information systems that can operate sustainably to inform local development efforts beyond the life of the project.

Monitoring and evaluation has in recent years gained a higher profile in development work, but a "... rush to create 'lessons learned' units within the United Nations and elsewhere, and to convene seminars or conferences, should not be confused with the actual learning of lessons."¹⁹ M&E is focused on single interventions in specific contexts, toward direct and pragmatic understanding in support of project achievements, which differs from social science research that treats a project as a case study to be used toward building theoretical knowledge of general rules and predictable consequences. Differences in the nature of M&E work from social science research suggest that special efforts may be required to glean key general lessons from the strategies and applications of M&E practices. Building pragmatic evidence-based knowledge of tools and approaches that tend to work best under specific sets of circumstances must occur in the potentially collaborative space between these currently divergent interests in the development field.

¹⁹ Weiss, 2001: 420.

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