

What Conservation Can Learn from Other Fields about Monitoring and Evaluation

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The field of conservation suffers from having no common approaches for measuring bottom-line success, describing the assumptions made by practitioners, comparing projects' effectiveness and efficiency, and capturing learning. As a result, managers and practitioners are limited in their ability to learn from one another, and donors question the value of their investments.

In this respect, the conservation sector affords interesting parallels with some other fields during their formative years. For example, in the early days of capitalism in the 1700s and 1800s, most managers and investors faced a crippling lack of financial information. Managers typically did not monitor the progress of their companies in any systematic fashion. Unless they had access to inside information, investors had no way of comparing the prospective risks and rewards of investing in different companies. At best, financial data were presented in incomparable formats, and at worst, they were fabrications.

To make sound business decisions about a given firm, a manager or financial investor needs some basic information. At a minimum, this includes current and expected future bottom-line profits, the line items and assumptions involved in calculating these profits, the firm's assets and liabilities, and the firm's business plan. It also helps to have a general understanding of the progress and prospects within the industrial sector in which the firm operates.

Beginning in the mid-1800s, some public companies began to present their information in a standardized

fashion and to hire independent accounting firms to audit their books and certify that the information was accurate. Although participation was initially voluntary, those firms that provided better information began to attract investors preferentially. Over time, the system became institutionalized and was regulated by government agencies. Nevertheless, even today the system is far from perfect; the corporate accounting scandals that have dominated the news and financial pages over the past year have once again highlighted the problems that managers and investors face when confronted with inaccurate or misleading information.

A lack of information has also caused problems for nonprofit organizations. Starting in the 1950s and 1960s, managers in a wide range of fields, including international development, public health, education, and social services, began to realize that they also needed better information. This was essential for making intelligent decisions about deploying scarce resources and for convincing governments and donor organizations that the nonprofits were effective and thus represented a good investment. To this end, far-sighted organizations in these fields began to develop monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approaches to obtain the information they needed.

Conservation practitioners can benefit from the experience gained in these fields. To this end, Foundations of Success, in partnership with the Wildlife Conservation Society and Conservation International and with support from the Moore Foundation, has undertaken a systematic survey of how

M&E is done in a variety of fields, including business, development, public health, education, and social services as well as conservation. We analyzed more than 200 different publications and distilled the ideas they contained into some basic lessons that could inform M&E in conservation.

One major lesson that emerges is that the development of M&E approaches in all of these fields has gone through a roughly parallel evolutionary process. Most fields began with external "summative" evaluations of the merit or worth of a completed project or program. Over time, each field added more participatory "formative" evaluations that took place periodically during the life of the program or project; these evaluations were designed to help improve the program or the production process. Finally, in each field, organizations began to integrate evaluation into an iterative project or program cycle designed to promote learning and adaptive management. In conservation, this means that we cannot treat evaluation as a one-off event; instead, we need to build it into our systems for designing, managing, and monitoring projects and programs.

Another lesson is that effective M&E cannot focus just on the outcome. M&E also has to consider the intervention being conducted and the various independent variables that affect the outcome. In the financial world, this means focusing not just on the bottom-line profit or loss figure but also on obtaining information about the costs of inputs, the amount of sales, and the production process. In conservation, this means that we cannot merely focus on

assessing the state of biodiversity (however a project or organization chooses to define it); we must also consider the threats to that biodiversity and the actions used to counter the threats.

A third lesson is that effective M&E cannot consider only the absolute effectiveness of the entity being evaluated. Managers must also think about effectiveness relative to the context or system in which the entity is operating. For example, in a business climate in which stock market valuations as a whole drop by 20 percent, a firm that loses only 5 percent may be doing well. For conservation, this implies that we need to understand the ecological and sociopolitical systems in which projects take place. A project that maintains the status quo in the face of major threats may be doing much better than a project that makes substantial gains when threats are minimal and resources are abundant. Thinking about systems also enables those involved with conservation projects to identify high-leverage actions and better manage uncertainty in complex situations.

A fourth lesson is that effective M&E does not necessarily require strict "third-party" auditing. Instead, the degree of external auditing required depends on how and by whom the information is going to be used. If M&E is to be used primarily by practitioners and managers to improve their projects and programs and to promote learning, then internal approaches make the most sense. If, however, M&E work is going to be used primarily by outside investors as in the business world, then

some degree of external auditing or support may be required.

Although not all of the fields that we surveyed have yet learned it, a final lesson is that having all players in a given field use common (or at least comparable) approaches to carry out their work enables managers to learn from one another and investors to understand what they are buying. In business, the devel-

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opment of enhanced management tools and large-scale investment in public stocks was greatly facilitated when companies began to adhere to the mutually agreed upon, generally accepted accounting principles that govern how information should be collected and presented. This suggests that in conservation we might develop common approaches for designing, managing, and monitoring projects and programs. At a minimum, this principle

might entail developing frameworks and languages that, although they may be proprietary, are easily comparable with one another; at the extreme, it would entail developing one common system and language.

Developing common M&E approaches will require a lot of hard work and cooperation across conservation organizations. Fortunately, many members of the conservation community are beginning to recognize both the importance of undertaking this work and the financial and programmatic benefits of working collaboratively in this endeavor. A number of cross-institutional initiatives have begun that build on existing systems within the conservation community as well as on the lessons garnered from other fields.

Having common M&E approaches will provide practitioners and managers with the information they need to make better decisions. It will enable cross-project learning. And perhaps most important, it will inspire confidence in individuals, donors, and society as a whole that the field of conservation is worthy of substantial and continuing investment.

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