Draft Synthesis of an Approach for Doing Effective M&E from the Fields of Conservation, Development, Public Health and Population, Education, and Business

Preliminary Results of the
Measuring Conservation Impact Initiative

Produced by: Foundations of Success (FOS)

With

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About This Document

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Introduction

This document is one component of a draft synthesized framework for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) based on a review of principles and recommendations from the fields of conservation, development, health and population, education, and business. It focuses on programmatic or process improvement M&E for which the impacts of specific interventions are gauged and used to enhance management.

Foundations of Success undertook this project in an effort to learn from other fields. Monitoring and evaluation has been widely used in other disciplines and we believed there were many lessons-learned to be harvested. We hope that this study will provide important information to conservation managers to help inform the most effective way forward in conservation M&E.

We have organized the principles and recommendations into eight categories that comprise the project management cycle. We found that this cycle – or some closely related form of it – is widely adopted in the fields that we reviewed. However, the entire process is rarely applied from start to finish in most of the resources we reviewed. The steps in the cycle include:

1. **Conceptualize** what you will achieve in the context of where you are working.
2. **Plan** what you want to do.
3. **Do** the activities necessary to achieve your mission.
4. **Check** to ensure you are reaching your intended goals.
5. **Analyze** your data to evaluate the effectiveness of your activities.
6. **Communicate** your results to promote learning.
7. **Use** your results to **Adapt** your project to maximize impact.
8. **Iterate** – Go through the project cycle continuously to constantly improve.

While the focus of this study was on M&E (what many practitioners consider to be Step 4 in the project cycle), our review of the literature confirmed that this step cannot be considered independently of the other steps in the project cycle. We have thus included relevant principles related to M&E for each step in the cycle.

We examined over 250 publications and websites for this analysis on M&E systems. Overall, we found much conceptual and operational consistency among the fields we included in the study. Reference information for all of the publications we reviewed is available in a database found at www.FOSonline.org. In addition, the in-depth syntheses for each of the fields we analyzed are available on our website.

The framework described in this document is divided into four categories. Numbered entries represent the *steps in the process* of planning and implementing M&E. Lettered entries are specific *principles* for doing M&E. For each principle, we provide the specific *tasks* that must be completed and some *guidance* for doing them.

Relationship Between This Document and CMP's Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation

This document provided a basis for discussion among Conservation Measures Partnership (CMP) members to identify the key steps, principles, guidance, and tasks for doing good conservation. Based on this discussion, CMP members developed the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation. The Open Standards bring together common concepts, approaches, and terminology in conservation project design, management, and monitoring in order to help practitioners improve the practice of conservation.

1. Design

A. Be clear about the issue or problem you intend to address.

Tasks

- Establish a clear and common purpose.
- Select the specific problem that the project will address.
- Clearly articulate and document the problem statement.
- Clearly identify needs and opportunities.
- Identify who will be affected by the project and who needs to be involved in its design/implementation.

Guidance

- Involve local stakeholders in identifying social, economic and environmental concerns.

B. Understand the context in which your project takes place.

Tasks

- Conduct a thorough needs assessment.
- Analyze past and future trends.

Guidance

- Be clear about the information you need to collect.
- Use whatever secondary data and information exist.
- Use appropriate methods when primary data are required.
- Use direct observation where possible.
- Be realistic – only collect data you can feasibly access.
- Involve experts in assessing the severity of the problem to be addressed.

C. Understand your programmatic target audience.

Tasks

- Conduct a thorough audience analysis

Guidance

- Include different perspective in the design of your project.
- Understand your audiences.
- Talk to relevant key informants.
- Secure participation of relevant stakeholders from the beginning.
- Use multiple methods, interviewers, and questions to "triangulate" information.

D. Create a model of the situation in which your project will take place.

Tasks

- Create a graphical representation of your model.
- Analyze alternative ways to address the problem.
- Clearly articulate your core assumptions.

Guidance

- Keep your model as simple as possible but make sure it is also as complete as possible.
- Build your model as a team.
- Use models to keep team members on same page.

2. Plan

A. Develop clear goals and objectives that support your organization's mission.

Tasks

- Explicitly link your goals and objectives to the results of your needs assessment and audience analysis.
- Identify "key factors" in your model that will be addressed by your project.
- Target goals and objectives to identified "key factors."
- State goals and objectives as measurable changes.
- Write out your goals and objectives using mutually agreed upon criteria.[1]
- Aggregate results to next highest level (e.g., objectives to goals).

Guidance

- Make targets meaningful.
- Make sure goals, objectives, and activities are politically, socially, ecologically appropriate.
- Set ambitious but realistic goals.
- Involve extension program staff in estimating what target level is realistic to achieve, based on the past experience of comparable programs.
- Continually discuss objectives with team and stakeholders at predetermined intervals.

[1] See Attachment 1 for criteria for goals and objectives.

B. Clearly define how you think your project activities address need.

Tasks

- Strategically select activities that will have highest returns.
- Write out your activities using mutually agreed upon criteria.[2]
- Make explicit the links between your activities and your objectives and goal.
- Develop "results" or "impact" chains or a logic model that demonstrate the causal link between activities and impact.
- Revise results chains as conditions change.
- Identify risk factors at each step and minimize.
- Map your activities on to the model that you developed based on the needs assessment.

Guidance

- Use results chains to interpret results for management and as communications tools.
- Take into account the effects of other public and private sector programs that may complement or contradict your project.
- Examine the context in sufficient detail to be able to identify probable influences on the program.

C. Clearly define roles and responsibilities of those involved

Tasks

- For each individual team member and organization that will be involved in the M&E, write out roles and responsibilities.
- Discuss and agree upon roles and responsibilities among team members.

Guidance

- Use interdisciplinary teams where appropriate to develop appropriate goals, objectives, and activities.

3. Do

There is not much in the literature related to project implementation. Most M&E literature assumes the project and its M&E system are well executed. Some general guidance includes:

Guidance

- Don't get stuck in planning paralysis
- Be realistic about the amount of time it may take to attain change.
- Be realistic about how much you can achieve.

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[2] See Attachment 1 for criteria for activities.

4. Check

A. Explicitly link your M&E to your goals, objectives, and activities.

Tasks

- Develop your M&E plan when you develop your action/management/work plan.
- Conduct evaluation throughout the project cycle.
- Collect baseline and follow-up data to gauge “exposure” and impact.

Guidance

- Prioritize focus of evaluation – if you have to choose, start by measuring most important objectives.
- Design your M&E system to isolate and assess the effects of your intervention.

B. Develop a strategy to use M&E results.

Tasks

- Clearly define your audiences who will use the M&E results.
- Clearly articulate M&E questions.
- For each element of data collected, define how you plan to analyze the results.
- Plan for evaluation results dissemination.
- Link each use with a specific user.

Guidance

- Use results to determine impact.
- Design your M&E system to generate information that is appropriate for its intended use and the audience.
- Carry out your M&E at the appropriate geographical and social scales – match them to the scale you expect to influence with your intervention.
- Be clear on how M&E of your project fits into the activities and priorities of your organization.
- Use justifiable and validated standards that are credible to all stakeholders.
- Make sure results of M&E system make sense and can be incorporated into management.
- Provide data to managers over life of project.
- Accept informal evaluation procedures for small programmatic changes – use explicit and formal evaluation procedures for major decisions/changes.
- Design your M&E to meet – not exceed – the required level of sophistication.
- Plan your investment of resources in your M&E system to be consistent with the action you are taking.
- Develop cost-effective means to do M&E.

- Use “experts” to help in M&E when required.
- Collect only what you need, not what is merely interesting.
- Get it right before you go public. Be sure that your initial monitoring methods are of high quality. Refine the methods through peer review and external reviews, before promoting them broadly.
- Consider the program’s stage of development and current context.

C. Define and use the best possible indicators for your M&E plan.

Tasks

- Derive indicators directly from goals, objectives, and activities.
- Write out your indicators using mutually agreed upon criteria.[3]
- Pretest your indicators to determine their suitability.

Guidance

- If possible and appropriate, use M&E data generated by other systems.
- Collect only the data you need.
- Use indicators understandable by your target audience.
- Define and use indicators that can be collected as part of daily project management.
- Use proxy indicators if direct measurement is not feasible.
- Refine indicators as you gain experience.
- Use indicators to determine how well targets are achieved and how well a program is performing.
- Indicators of changes in knowledge and attitudes can include measures of immediate outcome or indicators of more long-term changes that occur over several months or years.
- Indicators should be broad enough that they can be measured for all relevant sites, activities and/or outcomes.
- Establish similar metrics (within an organization) so that comparisons can be made between sites and projects..

D. Measure relevant factors in your model to explicitly test programmatic assumptions.

Tasks

- Measure the status of factors in your causal chain – focus on those directly related to your goals, objectives, and activities.
- Measure factors in step-wise (chronological) order to gauge progress along chain.
- Measure both processes and impacts.

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[3] See Attachment 1 for criteria for indicators.

- Measure potential confounding factors and other factors that influence what you are trying to achieve.
- Collect baseline data and follow-up assessments to measure not only project-specific outcomes but also level of exposure to the project.

Guidance

- During monitoring, refer to your model to understand context.
- Consider social, economic, cultural, and political factors to assess impact.

E. Select appropriate methods to collect M&E data.

Tasks

- Identify methods that will give you the data you need.
- Write out your methods using mutually agreed upon criteria.[4]
- Pretest methods before using them in your M&E system.

Guidance

- Use methods that don't disrupt work.
- Use methods with known validity/reliability.
- Calibrate data collection efforts when possible.
- Be open to both quantitative and qualitative methods.
- Use methods that are comparable over time and across indicators.
- Test out assessment methods in an iterative way, experimenting, gaining feedback, learning and improving the methods.
- Select methods to provide the appropriate information to address stakeholder concerns.
- When choosing methods, consider which methods your audience will perceive as most credible.
- Take into account the skills of the staff who will be collecting the data. Many qualitative methods, such as focus groups, direct observation or interviewing, require training and close supervision to yield valid results.
- Consider the cost-benefit of different methods. Obtaining extremely precise findings is apt to be expensive. It is often not practical or advisable to
- Consider how much time would be needed to collect and analyze the data generated by different methods.
- When it is not possible to use rigorous controlled experiments, apply data triangulation to substantiate a link between interventions and observed changes.

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[4] See Attachment 1 for criteria for methods.

F. Determine who will collect will collect M&E data.

Tasks

- Clearly determine the individuals and institutions that will participate in M&E activities.
- Define roles and responsibilities of M&E team.
- Formally include roles and responsibilities in job descriptions.

Guidance

- Maintain objectivity in the M&E system to the extent possible.
- Allow your M&E system to be managed semi-independently of your project implementation.
- Consider using external evaluators to maintain objectivity.
- Use internal evaluators for in-depth understanding of projects.
- Use multidisciplinary teams for broad perspective.
- Triangulate with different data collectors when necessary/possible.
- Be sure that your assessment results make sense.
- Use trustworthy and competent evaluators.
- Work as a group/team to facilitate learning.

G. Develop and implement a formal M&E plan.

Tasks

- Write out your M&E plan including goals, objectives, activities, indicators, methods, and roles and responsibilities of team members.
- Develop a feasible timeline for implementation of your M&E plan.
- Develop a budget for your M&E activities.
- Implement your M&E plan.

Guidance

- To the extent possible, keep your M&E system flexible
- Keep it "open to surprises."
- Look beyond expected impacts to assess actual, unexpected impacts.
- Follow standards of ethics and propriety in M&E
- Protect "human subjects."
- Be respectful.
- Be fair, complete, and honest – report both positives and negatives.
- Make finding available to those involved or who were promised results.
- Handle conflict of interest openly.

5. Analyze

A. Plan for storage, processing, and analysis of data and information when you design your management and M&E systems.

Tasks

- Systematically check, clean, and code raw data as soon as you get them.
- Analyze results against predetermined standards or criteria.

Guidance

- Analyze data as “close” to the field as possible.
- Use analytical methods that give useful and understandable results.
- Plan for and use expert technical assistance when needed.
- Ensure methods and measures are comparable over time and, to the extent possible, across variables.

B. Analyze why an intervention succeeded or failed – not impact only.

Tasks

- Review and test the accuracy of assumptions.
- Review your results in context of your model.
- Assess if goals and objectives were met and if these truly had impact.
- Determine if thresholds of goals and objectives were adequately set.
- Isolate gross impact observed from net impact attributable to the program.

Guidance

- Choose analytical methods that are more efficient in isolating program effects from other influences.
- When possible, use rigorous analytical designs and/or statistical analyses. Randomized experiments and quasi-experimental design are the best methods for establishing causality.
- Approach interpretation with caution. Avoid declaring causality when methods do not warrant such claims.
- Refine analysis by discussing results with stakeholders
- Do not overstate conclusions.
- Make sure you have exhausted inquiry to determine causation.
- Analyze the effectiveness of your monitoring system as you analyze the effectiveness of your program interventions.
- Clearly document the limitations of the M&E design as they become apparent.
- Analyze your results in a systematic but creative fashion.

- Use trend data and projections to illustrate changes over time – and potential changes for the future.
- Don't get sidetracked on interesting but programmatically irrelevant analyses.
- In interpreting your data, keep in mind the difference between statistical significance and practical meaning.

6. Communicate

A. Develop a clear dissemination strategy aimed at your audience.

Tasks

- Identify your audience from the very beginning of the project.
- Determine the best way to communicate with your audience (part of your audience analysis).

Guidance

- Tailor your results to your audience and how they like to learn.
- Communicate in language and style that is appropriate to your audience. Avoid use of discipline-specific language, such as statistical terms or social science terminology.
- Continually consult your audience throughout the M&E process to make sure you know what they want.
- Disseminate results to users in a timely fashion.
- Prepare your audience to understand the meaning, limitations, and interpretation of results prior to their actual release.
- Frame the findings and implication in a context relevant to your audience's situation.
- Present your results graphically and in text.
- Don't present more detail than your audience wants.

B. Develop communications products that focus on management issues.

Tasks

- Provide clear management recommendations based on your M&E analysis.
- Provide all necessary details to help interpret results.
- Provide alternatives based on the results.

Guidance

- Throughout the project, work closely with decision makers and program staff so as not to surprise them with your findings or recommendations.
- Determine the appropriate level of specificity for your recommendations.
- Consider your program context when formulating recommendations.

- Provide highlights of important issues.
- Be constructive in the way you communicate results.
- Phrase results in action-oriented terminology.

C. Evaluate the effectiveness of your communications products.

Tasks
- Provide a mechanism for users to provide feedback on your communications products.

Guidance
- Inform users of the strengths and weaknesses of the M&E system you used.

7. Use/Adapt

A. Incorporate analysis into decisions.

Tasks
- Describe expected benefits and costs associated with your recommendations.
- Work with managers to ensure use of analysis.

Guidance
- Plan for the use of your analysis at the beginning of the project.
- Make sure managers drive evaluation so results are used.
- Make sure time is set aside for your entire team to review, digest, and plan to use the analysis.
- Use results to increase cost-effectiveness.
- Use results to see if you need to adjust monitoring or communications.
- Use findings to identify action needed to improve programs.

B. Make changes to your goals, objectives, and activities as needed based on your analysis.

Tasks
- Change your assumptions if need be based on your analysis.
- Modify your actions in the way your analysis informs you to do so.
- Identify gaps between program objectives and actual performance, analyze why these gaps have occurred, and develop strategies for improving performance.
- Document changes in management objectives and strategies (so others will understand the how and why behind your management system).

Guidance
- Use evaluation results to determine if current strategies are the most effective way to reach your organization's long-term goals and mission.

C. Make changes to your M&E system based on your results.

Tasks

- Determine the adequacy of your M&E methods and indicators and modify them if needed.

Guidance

8. Iterate

A. Revisits steps in the M&E process as required.

Tasks

- Modify individual steps based on what you have learned
- Develop a plan to continually evaluate your project design, implementation, and monitoring.

Guidance

- Continually strive to improve your project through effective monitoring.
- Promote Reflection in Action.

B. Create a Learning Environment.

Tasks

- Get commitment from leaders before moving forward.
- Provide safe environment for questioning the status quo.
- Systematically document progress and process.

Guidance

- Encourage experimentation.
- Create a "safe-fail" environment.
- Take advantages of unexpected results ("surprises").
- Keep an open mind.
- View the problem and situation from various perspectives.
- Seek, identify, and resolve problems.

General principles

These are universal principles that cut across all of the steps described above.

Involve relevant stakeholders.

Prepare and adhere to a formal timeline.

Prepare and adhere to a formal budget.