MercyCorps

DM&E Tip Sheet #10: Structuring the DM&E Unit

This tip sheet is for field leadership teams structuring a country-level DM&E unit. Further pages provide guidance and greater detail on a recommended structure.

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Why do we need to think about how to structure DM&E functions?

Strong M&E performance requires that we figure out an effective way to ensure that M&E activities are well planned for, receive sufficient resources to be implemented (including staff time), and are integrated throughout the program cycle to address current program management needs and future programming decisions. One of the ways we do that is by determining the most effective structure or placement for DM&E functions. There are, however, many possible variations to this structure. The question of how best to structure DM&E is often posed as a debate between two options; a) a unit completely separate from programs and b) an approach fully integrated into programs.

> ***Possible ways to structure DM&E***
>
> 1. A DM&E team completely separate from program implementation teams
> 2. DM&E functions integrated completely into program implementation teams
>
> ***Mercy Corps' recommended structure***
>
> 3. A hybrid approach – minimum 1 dedicated M&E staff position and program "focal points"

What are some benefits and risks of each of these approaches?

A unit separate from program implementation teams.

This structure goes the furthest to realize two important M&E functions: first, that M&E gets implemented, and second, that data collection and analysis be objective so as to be externally credible. It also allows for integration of and coordination among M&E functions across multiple, separate projects. This separate unit is the team to ensure that a country-level program strategy has a corresponding M&E plan to track it.

We do run risks, however, with the separate-unit structure. One risk is that it increases resistance to M&E by artificially creating a line between program management and DM&E, slowing the integration of DM&E functions into program implementation and inhibiting its use. It also runs the risk that this separate unit is perceived as a "policing" unit whose primary responsibility is program auditing rather than setting up systems to enable the broader team to learn from programming. Continued availability of funding for a separate unit, with fluctuations over time in the country grant portfolio, may also prove to be a limitation.

> ***DM&E is an opportunity to develop national staff and promote from within:***
>
> A few Mercy Corps countries have started with expatriate country-level M&E positions to help set up the system and mentor local staff, and then transitioned those positions fully to local staff.

If the size of a given country program or the complexity of DM&E requirements for a given program requires that a separate unit be set-up, it is advisable to transition into this structure only after establishing a DM&E system with M&E functions fully integrated into program teams as described below. This will improve the likelihood that staff members are familiar with, and not threatened by, DM&E; and, that program staff members continue to collaborate closely with DM&E staff members.

M&E functions fully integrated into program teams.

This structure is best utilized to ensure that, one, M&E data collection processes integrate smoothly into program implementation, two, that M&E data best address program management needs, and three, that M&E lessons are reflected back into future programming decisions.

This approach, however, also has risks. First, by making it everyone's responsibility we run the risk that it becomes no one's responsibility. In other words, without having at least one person fully dedicated to DM&E, working to get people's attention and focus on it, we increase the chances that M&E activities will get lost in the push to implement program activities. Also, we increase the likelihood that each project or program team will create redundant systems and "re-invent the wheel" unnecessarily if there is no one looking across multiple M&E efforts to transfer approaches and systems from one program to the next.

What approach does Mercy Corps recommend?

In order to take advantage of the benefits of each structure and to mitigate the risks of each, we recommend a ***hybrid structure*** (see a graphical depiction of this structure in Annex I). This structure strives to balance the two overarching critical challenges of either not having enough dedicated time to make sure M&E gets done or resistance to M&E because it is seen as separate from programs. The hybrid structure should include:

At least one M&E-dedicated staff position to <u>facilitate</u> the development and implementation of the M&E system.

The key word in that sentence is "facilitate". The country M&E unit (whether one or more persons) should be set up as a supporting unit only, facilitating the development of the M&E systems with full engagement of the program implementation teams. Ideally this team would sit within the programs department or unit, as opposed to within operations or admin, so as not to set it up as separate from programs.

> ***<u>Full-time M&E team members:</u>***
>
> - You may need more than one M&E position, depending on the complexity and scope of the system to be developed and maintained.
>   - In more **complex systems**, it is likely that at least two general M&E positions will be required – one charged with *overall DM&E management*, workplans, timelines, consensus building, results reporting and coordination; and, one charged with *data management* and system (including databases) maintenance.
>   - In **start-up or less complex** systems, one general M&E position should be sufficient.

This team would be responsible for, among other things:

- providing technical assistance to project teams in the development of the project-level monitoring systems (including consulting on data collection tools, data management solutions, the use of monitoring data in reporting and training staff) and in the design of new programming.
- facilitating the design of project evaluations, conducting them when it's determined evaluations should be internally conducted, or managing consultants when they will be external evaluations. Of course, project staff should also participate in project evaluations, at a minimum by helping analyze the information collected and determining how that analysis will be used, and potentially assisting with the data collection itself, depending on the expectations of the donor and schedules.
- facilitating the development of a country-level log frame (with indicators) that reflects the country's programming strategy.
- developing a monitoring and evaluation system that tracks the indicators included in the country programming strategy and facilitating analysis workshops that involve the broader program team.

M&E "focal points" in program implementation teams with a percentage of their time dedicated to supporting M&E functions.

M&E Focal Points:

M&E focal points do NOT need to be M&E technical specialists. Instead, see this as another good opportunity to build national staff capacity. It is helpful, however, if they possess sectoral knowledge/experience related to the program they work on as this speeds up the process of developing the M&E system.

There should be at least one focal point per project, programming sector or geographical unit to promote representation in and outreach to program implementation teams. These focal points continue to be a part of their respective programming teams, but they have a percentage of their time spent collaborating with the DM&E unit to ensure that M&E systems adequately reflect program management information needs and that M&E processes are integrated into program implementation strategies.

In the start-up phase or in a smaller country program with less complex DM&E systems, M&E focal points are likely to be one program staff member per program or per field office who dedicate approximately 25% of her/his time to DM&E. In a larger country program or a program with a more complex DM&E system, it may be necessary to transition part-time M&E focal points to full-time M&E officers within the program implementation team (for example, 80% M&E and 20% program implementation) to ensure that adequate time is allocated to meet M&E requirements.

Within this structure, monitoring and reporting is the responsibility of program implementation teams. The M&E unit (the full-time position(s) alongside the focal points) facilitates the set-up of that system, links monitoring from one project to that of another as appropriate, and when needed, facilitates analysis and reflection workshops with program implementation staff to ensure maximum use is being made of monitoring data. Evaluations also become a joint responsibility, with perhaps the M&E unit taking on a bigger share of the workload to organize and facilitate implementation. You might also consider having M&E unit managers to lead internal evaluations when resources are limited and do not allow for external evaluations.

M&E Focal Points – possible bullet items to include in program PDs, examples from MC Afghanistan:

- **Responsibilities**
  - Attend or participate in regular DM&E support unit meetings
  - Assist in designing and implementing the country-level DM&E system
  - Present program-specific needs and feedback to DM&E core team
  - Help develop and ensure the understanding and use of DM&E forms
  - Assist program managers and staff in understanding databases and in utilizing data analysis tools
  - Participate in program kick-off workshops
  - Help design and analyze baseline, midline and endline surveys/evaluations
  - Facilitate the use of data and results in regular program meetings
- **Recommended skills**
  - Trained on and knowledgeable about basic DM&E concepts and methodologies
  - Familiar with Excel and basic Access functions

Potential additional staff positions within the DM&E Unit.

As country programs grow in size, there is a greater need for comprehensive "systems" that facilitate easier DM&E data collection, analysis, and use. Feeding information back to staff, beneficiaries, and donors requires up-to-date M&E systems, which may also need to include the following two positions:

- A **database designer or MIS officer** who can develop systems that balance national staff capacities with M&E data collection needs would strengthen the unit. If resources don't permit a full-time database designer or MIS officer in the DM&E Unit, usually the case for project-level M&E systems, it is recommended to incorporate M&E responsibilities into position descriptions of IT staff who are part of admin (another hybrid "focal point"-style role).
- A **communications or reporting person** would play a pivotal role in taking lots of quantitative M&E data, as well as photos and qualitative data, and distilling it for various stakeholders. This person would ensure timely dissemination of information to key audiences.

What are some approaches we can take to reduce the risks that remain in the recommended approach?

While we think that this hybrid approach is the best one to ensure both that M&E gets dedicated time invested in it to make it happen and to ensure that it's well integrated into programs, we recognize that risks remain with it.

The following are a few strategies teams can take to reduce the challenges that remain in how DM&E is structured in the country office. It is important to note here the critical role the Country Director and Regional Program Director play in supporting and reinforcing this hybrid, team-work approach, so that M&E is understood to be a part of everyone's job, even while there are full-time staff supporting it. Which leads us to the first approach.

Strategies to overcome lingering risks:

- Integrate M&E into everyone's job
- Consult extensively with program staff during the development of the system
- Communicate regularly with program staff on data generated by the system
- Demystify and simplify M&E approaches
- Clarify placement of the program audit function

DM&E is everyone's responsibility – integrate it into everyone's job.

While experience shows that we accomplish more with M&E when we have people identified as responsible for making sure it gets done, we also have learned that what gets done is only useful if all program staff play a role in the development and implementation of the system and truly see M&E as a part of their job. The following are a few recommended strategies to put action to the rhetoric that M&E is everyone's responsibility:

- Build a percentage of time to implement and support M&E into everyone's position descriptions; at a minimum, five per cent. Activities include regular monitoring of program areas of responsibility and participation in periodic reflection and planning workshops.
- Include these M&E responsibilities into people's IOPs or performance management plans and annual review processes to reinforce that M&E is integral to their jobs.
- Include an overview of M&E as part of all new staff orientations.[1]

[1] Consider having staff go through the online DM&E training as part of their orientation. To register and take the course, visit http://classes.mercycorps.org. For any questions, email the HQ DM&E team at dme@mercycorps.org.

> ***Socializing M&E – an example from MC Indonesia***
>
> ***STRATEGY***: The MC Indonesia team instituted a policy that the M&E team, on a monthly basis, gives project managers an example of how to present their own project data in an interesting or unique visual format.
>
> ***RESULT***: Allowing project managers to see regular examples of interesting ways in which the data can be used helped obtain greater buy-in for implementing the data collection duties.

- Include as many program implementation staff as possible in the DM&E systems design sessions during the project kick-off workshop. Conversely, it's also critical to ensure that DM&E staff, including any country-level DM&E staff, take an active role during new project start-up periods. This helps ensure that project systems align with other M&E systems and processes in the country program, as well as promoting buy-in to the country-level systems and integrating everyone as part of the same team.
- Structure data management systems so that program teams can access and view their program data at any time. This will reinforce the idea that M&E is structured principally for their use, and will increase program ownership of M&E processes.

Consult extensively with program implementation staff on the design of the system and during its development.

A participatory design to the M&E system, while time consuming, leads to greater buy-in once it is set up and ready to be implemented. It also increases the likelihood that the schedule and methodology for collecting the data integrates smoothly into program implementation activities. It also begins the socialization process. The more that program staff are part of conversations on how M&E will be structured for the country strategy and for their particular project, the more they will get used to the idea that it is now a part of their job.

Communicate regularly on data generated by the system.

Regular communication and meetings of the entire program team – DM&E and program implementation – can promote cooperation and shared understanding of problems and lead to joint solution setting. Such regular meetings reinforce that M&E is ultimately about serving the needs of program staff in order to improve program outcomes for communities and partners, and allows for continued participation in direction setting for the M&E team.

> ***Regular communication pays off!***
>
> These meetings also provide an opportunity to make necessary changes to program implementation plans and for new team members to gain ownership of their role in the process.

Keep in mind that these communication opportunities (annual results meetings, workshops, etc.) sometimes need to be budgeted.

Demystify and simplify your M&E approaches.

Full ownership of the M&E system by program implementation teams requires that everyone understands what is being collected, why it is being collected (how it will be used) and how it is being collected. To accomplish this, M&E approaches (from the number and type of indicators to the methodologies employed to collect the data) should be as user-friendly as possible, while still being useful. This means we need to make our M&E approaches less intimidating and less time consuming for staff to implement and reflect upon. Wherever possible, it is recommended to construct an Excel-based data management system and move towards a database only if it is absolutely required.

Clarify placement of the program audit or compliance function within the country's operational structure and distinguish it from the DM&E unit.

Country teams are sometimes tempted to place the program audit or compliance function within the DM&E unit, using the DM&E team to double-check or verify whether programs are reporting accurately or are implementing on schedule. This is understandable given the overlap that exists between the two functions; well-structured program monitoring systems are a valuable resource for ensuring compliance with program commitments.

We strongly recommend, however, that compliance functions reside separately from the DM&E team. Otherwise, we increase the risk that M&E will be positioned as a "policing" role and will lose its value as a general program management and learning tool. Indeed, conflicts of interest have arisen in the past that have hampered the effectiveness of the DM&E team and caused tensions with program staff. It is much preferable to clearly distinguish program compliance as the responsibility of administration staff, the Deputy of Programs and/or Country Director, or other Program team members. Likewise, any financial auditing should be the responsibility of finance staff. This way, the DM&E team can remain focused on building sound M&E approaches into projects without losing the trust of project staff or managers.

The role of the M&E team in ensuring compliance, if any, can be to facilitate access to the available monitoring data so that it can be used by compliance officers in carrying out their responsibilities. This distinction between compliance and M&E can be reflected not just in operational structures, but also can be reinforced in PDs, in staff orientations and other means of regular communications on the roles and responsibilities of program staff – M&E and program implementation teams alike.

Other issues to consider

Project M&E positions within a country-level M&E structure

Some projects, particularly longer or more complex programs, may have the need to budget a full-time, dedicated M&E officer position to help ensure that it's particular data and information needs are being addressed. The recommended hybrid structure can accommodate these positions. For example, these project-specific M&E officers often become the natural "focal points" who contribute to and help inform the country-level M&E system.

Often times the project-level M&E officer will take on more of the day-to-day responsibilities of implementing both monitoring and evaluation than is normally recommended for country-level positions. In these cases it is still recommended that the situation be approached in a somewhat "hybrid" fashion, separating the monitoring tasks from the evaluation tasks as much as possible and outlining the various functions between the M&E officer and the direct project implementers.

The role of local partners

Mercy Corps is now implementing a greater number of projects through partners, particularly local NGOs. As a result, we are taking on a greater role in M&E to ensure that our partners are on track with project implementation; however, as mentioned, M&E is everyone's responsibility, including partners. An M&E plan should be drafted during the design stage of the project which clearly assigns responsibilities and decision-making for M&E between Mercy Corps and our partners. When this is the case, additional factors to consider in the structure of the DM&E unit are the portfolio of programs in the country, the various implementation strategies (through local NGOs, CBOs, etc.) and the design/complexity of the projects themselves.

Budgeting

Usually, how the DM&E unit is structured and the roles it takes on are influenced by how programs within the country are funded. Country-level M&E positions and units may be funded like other technical specialist positions, by incorporating a percentage of the salary into different project budgets. However, different variations on the recommended "hybrid" structure are possible in order to reflect different funding situations. For example, full-time, project-level M&E staff with a few focal points may predominate in some structures while in others one or two staff with a significant percentage of time dedicated to M&E may be the norm in scenarios where we cannot afford to budget full-time, dedicated M&E officers.

DM&E unit manager as a critical function of country leadership

Consider elevating the M&E manager position as a critical function within the country staffing structure (i.e. senior positions). This adds credibility and weight to M&E undertakings. This seniority becomes a key resource, especially during the early stages of developing the M&E system, when skepticism is high and getting broad participation in its development is particularly challenging.

The role of the DM&E team in project design

Often times when discussing the role of the DM&E team we focus on monitoring and evaluation responsibilities and overlook those related to design. Project design calls for an additional set of skills (sectoral knowledge, creativeness/thinking "out of the box", social entrepreneurship, to name a few). The role of the DM&E team is to help refine logical frameworks developed by program design teams, with an eye towards making it as SMART as possible. The DM&E team members are also well positioned to help ensure that the indicators are feasible to implement and that they reflect, to the degree possible, existing M&E efforts within the country.

Other resources to help identify relevant issues when structuring the DM&E unit – they can all be found in the DM&E-in-a-Box toolkit on the MC Digital Library

- *First Steps in Designing a Country-level System: A Brief Overview*
- *Mercy Corps DM&E Tip Sheet #7: DM&E at Project Kick-off*
- *Mercy Corps DM&E Tip Sheet #8: Data Management*
- *Mercy Corps DM&E Tip Sheet #9: Budgeting for M&E*
- *DM&E Example Tool: Position Description for Country-level M&E Manager*
- *DM&E Example Tool: Position Description for Project M&E Officer*
- *DM&E Example Tool: Position Description for M&E Database Officer*

Annex I – *Example DM&E unit structure*

The Program Liaison Persons in the diagram below are the M&E focal points from the sectoral Program Teams, forming an Extended Team with the dedicated DM&E Core Team. This Core Team is interchangeable with the DM&E unit referred to in this document. Everyone in the Extended Team (including program team focal points, IT support officer and network administrator) should have some M&E responsibilities outlined in their position descriptions with corresponding percentages of time dedicated to this extended team.