

Developing a Value Proposition for M&E

Experiences of Mercy Corps staff who've invested in M&E

The study

The DM&E Initiative recently asked 23 people throughout the Mercy Corps world why they're motivated to invest in M&E and what practical returns they've experienced on that investment. We specifically targeted staff who have made extra-ordinary investments in M&E – energy, time, resources – in past or current positions. The sample of 17 respondents includes a Regional Program Director, Country Directors, Program Managers, DM&E Coordinators, POps, Resource Development and New Initiatives staff.

Mainstreaming solid M&E practices in country offices takes time and effort – around two years, according to one CD. In the end, is it worth it? Responses are grouped by themes below.

Quality Programming

1. M&E information allows us to adjust programming to better address needs and maximize impact.

Several respondents mentioned the ability to adjust programming based on M&E data. Examples:

"We are just about to use annual results data to review our impact to date and make programmatic improvements."

"After the field study in Jakarta on the FFP program (that was run simultaneously with an external evaluation), the team there significantly changed direction on how they were implementing the program (focusing less on the food aspect and more on promoting the values we are wanting to get across). They also moved to adopt community mobilization principles."

"We used DM&E to understand more about our AOR (though comprehensive baseline surveys and then annual surveys in the sites in which we worked) and get more into depth about our impact."

"Next month I will utilize data to lead an annual results review meeting with all program implementers to determine where there are opportunities to strengthen impact of programs with clear action planning and understand program successes/weaknesses (SWOT); ultimately to improve program results. Utilized data will inform donors of program results and hopefully, attain further funding."

2. M&E provides motivation, direction and transparency for staff and partners.

Respondents mentioned the benefit for staff and partners of clearly laying out objectives and measuring progress against indicators. Examples:

"I feel the greatest benefit so far...has been the way M&E impacted the focus of our own teams and partners on what we hope to achieve – the results they need to work toward. The M&E frameworks

Key Themes:

Program quality & management

- Solid M&E practices allow us to make adjustments to enhance program quality.
- M&E provides motivation, direction and transparency for staff and partners.
- M&E supports accountability, to partners, beneficiaries and to ourselves.
- M&E is part of a complete program package, and makes good management sense.

Fundraising & donor relations

- Securing follow-on funding is easier when there is concrete results information.
- Robust M&E is effective in attracting new funding with non-traditional donors.
- Evidence-based programming gives leverage with donors for innovating new interventions.
- Proposals benefit greatly from solid M&E planning and design principles.

The bottom line

- Good M&E takes time to develop...
- ...But delivers compelling results in terms of program quality and growth.

Developing an M&E Value Proposition

and tools articulate where we are going and gave people something to hold, to point toward, a direction, an aim."

"I currently have one project team that has become accustomed to doing a quarterly analysis of their progress. We take our indicator plan and...monitoring data and discuss why we did or did not meet our goals for the quarter...then makes an action plan to correct the situation, and sets new goals for the following quarter...I believe that the team that does the quarterly analysis, is the team that feels the most ownership of their program and is the most informed about where their program actually stands."

"Allowing our partners to see what we are doing, why we are doing it, and how it will contribute to the success of our project plays an enormous role in the development of their capacity to implement projects effectively."

"DM&E always improves the understanding of staff members about the purpose of programs and why we do the activities that we do. This is an very important factor because there is not always a common understanding about the purpose of our work. In the right context, DM&E can also further unify/motivate the country program team towards program excellence."

3. M&E supports accountability – accountability to the affected populations and to ourselves.

M&E data on objective-level indicators – such as changes in knowledge, attitudes, behavior and conditions – is a challenge, but helps keep us accountable and understand communities. Examples:

"[M&E is used] to get to know our communities better. How can we say we are a community based organization if we do not know the communities where we work?"

"Baseline results, when shared with beneficiaries, brought the aims down to the essential level of buy in. Beneficiaries set targets and action plans that MC and partners should be held accountable to – increasing our accountability."

"Program staff realize what measures they are going to be held accountable against."

"Since MC was not invited by beneficiaries or the host government to the country in which you work, and since there are a range of other actors who do basically what we do, how do you justify MC's presence in your country? To me our results are the foundation of our "right" to be in a country."

4. M&E is part of a complete program package and is good management practice.

Respondents cited the ways in which M&E plays a part in good program management . Examples:

"In my current position, I use it to see if we are on track with commitments to our donors, what the weight of various activities is against our budgets, whether our work is remaining focused on our objectives (both strategic and as stated in proposals)...This helps me know if we are working efficiently, whether I need to push the team to speed up work or be more focused in a particular area, and figure out what to present to the donor about our progress."

"It was relatively easy to say how many prosthetic limbs had been produced...but it was MUCH harder to show how rehabilitation had actually changed the nature of a disabled person's life. Trying to figure out how to take M&E to this next level has become...an important part of working as a manager of aid and development programs. Ultimately, if we're just counting activities and outputs, are we really sure we're out here doing something useful?"

"I see it as non-optional...It's part of setting up country programs and needs energy, time and staff resources the way procurement or finance does."

"In the effort to be competitive and ensure funding, you can't look at one or two things – it's a mix. It takes good relationships, good programming, data to show results, etc. It's a package, all together. You have to invest in 4 or 5 key things to make a continuous program work and grow healthily: like a wheel, without one of the axels it's not going to drive. M&E is a key axel."

Developing an M&E Value Proposition

"I would stress that it motivates, empowers and teaches the staff AND the quarterly analysis gives the project manager a perfect opportunity to pat their team on the back and tell them what a great job they are doing and how important their work is for the organization – something that is in short supply many times."

Donors & funding

5. Solid M&E data helps secure follow-on funding for projects and countries.

Respondents cited the strategic use of M&E data to obtain further funding for successful projects and programs. Examples:

"...the baseline data on anemia, worm infestation and malnutrition was absolutely essential for getting additional resources for the program...This information was used directly in the proposal to Ethos water /Starbucks for expanding the program."

"With CRDA being MC's only project in Serbia, new business and M&E took on extra added significance. Our prior M&E may have helped in winning the [AMAP] project."

"I used M&E data to help describe our work to donor reps in Washington and to advocate for funding for our program in Congress."

"For follow on funding on our current OFDA program we are using M&E data to inform our needs assessment and proposal development. This meant we did not need to carry out a new assessment as we could use our ongoing data collection."

6. Highlighting M&E data and good practices helps in accessing new funding sources, including foundations, corporations and private donors.

Respondents also noted better M&E information and practices as ways to attract new funding sources. Corporate donors and foundations are of particular importance. Examples:

"I believe our strong M&E investment in our proposal to the Nike Foundation gave us an edge over others competing for the grant. We had a large percentage of our budget line dedicated to M&E and a full-time staffer 'M&E technical advisor' as well."

"Most of our donors in China are corporate. The stronger we are in M&E and the more we invest in it, the more attractive we are to corporate donors."

"We are now working with a whole host of different donors and – in most cases – they are actively increasing their focus on strong M&E systems... we need to keep improving on M&E if we want to make sure we do actually continue to satisfy donor requirements (e.g. Gates or DFID)."

"Data from Lebanon was especially useful last year during the war, as we were talking with media and donors, trying to attract more support for our work."

"Especially foundations and corporations want much deeper results information, data nuggets included."

7. Evidence-based reporting gives us leverage with donors for evolving our programming.

M&E was viewed as useful for giving us the ability to influence donors and obtain buy-in for evolving our programming strategies. Examples:

"Through the monitoring activities our teams are prepared to inform the discussions about what and where new interventions would be beneficial."

Developing an M&E Value Proposition

"By moving beyond what donors require of us, we have the possibility of gathering and presenting information that can help lead donors in directions we believe are important."

"M&E gives us leverage with donors for shifting strategy and trying new, innovative things based on credibility and evidence, it allows us to not do the same thing all over again that all the others are doing."

"We want to be an agency that is always out ahead and one that is known for excellence in programming AND innovation. Both excellence and innovation can only be achieved if we have strong evidence-based information about our current work so that we can constantly evolve FORWARD instead of simply re-inventing the wheel over and over again."

"We have utilized the streamlined strategic program logical frameworks to help articulate what we do and how we do it – requesting that donors fund this strategy because we believe it works."

8. Good M&E design processes and planning help us write better proposals.

Many staff involved in proposal and project development emphasized the importance of good use of design principles and M&E processes in developing winning proposals. Examples:

"New program development consistently utilizes this [strategic country-level logframe] framework to shape consistent indicators and articulate our approach."

"We also used DM&E to do evaluations of each closing program, which we then shared with stakeholders – this was powerful because it really allowed us to use past programs to inform future programs."

"Our 'Key Steps to Effective M&E' have helped us write stronger "performance management" sections in our proposals...and this is becoming more and more important for donors, including European donors."

"From a fund-raising perspective, we use well-crafted objectives and indicators to explain to donors our expected results and how we'll measure them."

The bottom line:

Good M&E systems and practice take time to develop...

"We need to have realistic expectations about the time it takes to set up a good M&E system. It is hard work and takes lots of time and effort working on peoples thinking and attitudes. I think 2 years is a reasonable timeframe to see a country M&E system starting to do what we want and need it to do."

"Our M&E role will ultimately play a large capacity building effort with our local...NGO partners. It will take a serious investment of time and training, however the results (we hope) will be beneficial."

...but are improving, and are worth the effort.

"I used to be constantly in search of reports with hard data in them—we used to get nothing but fluff. Now, I can actually find monitoring results, with analysis, in many reports. We're still not completely there, but I think we are getting a whole lot better."

"I do not think we have yet done all we could to leverage our M&E work to sway donors or attract new funds. This is something that is being corrected now, with the arrival of our strong team here."