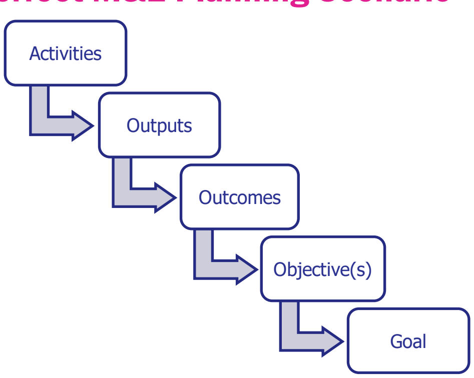
Balancing Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Priorities

Practical Tips on Data Collection for Compliance and Project Improvement

M&E planning never takes place in a vacuum. Service providers often find themselves navigating the competing demands of multiple grants or funders; integrating new M&E requirements into preexisting programs; and trying to collect additional data for learning and program improvement. Developing an M&E plan in this situation can feel like you have many puzzle pieces that need to fit together, all without seeing the full picture you are making. Balancing these multiple needs can also be time-consuming, particularly when staff capacity is already limited. This guide provides practical tips for collecting all the data your funders need, while also gathering information for learning and program improvement internal to your organization. With the right approach, you can effectively strike a balance that allows you to collect data beyond what your funder requires without over-burdening staff.

A Perfect M&E Planning Scenario



In an ideal world, you would begin designing your program by identifying a big-picture **goal** toward which you want to contribute. You would then narrow down this goal to a set of **objectives** you wish to achieve and follow this logically to a list of activities that would constitute your project.

You would organize these elements into a **theory of change** and identify relevant **indicators** of success as part of a **logframe**. These would form the basis of your **M&E plan**.

The **indicators** would then be used to inform a data collection plan, in which you would identify who collects the data, which methods and tools they use, and on what timeline they need to deliver. This data would be used to monitor and evaluate the success of the project and inform future activities, as well as to report to funders and other stakeholders.

However, in reality, project goals, objectives, activities, and indicators are often pre-determined by funder requirements. Incorporating these program elements and collecting data on these indicators are conditions for receiving funding, so they must be prioritized in your theory of change and M&E plan. This can leave you with less time and fewer resources to collect additional data to understand and improve your programming. How do you balance these competing priorities?

Start by Determining Data Needs

Begin by taking a full inventory of the indicators you are required to monitor by your funders. Review any awarded proposals and cooperative agreements to see what data you are required to collect. Seek clarification with your funder point(s) of contact where necessary. Do this for each funder until you have a full list of all the required data.

It can be helpful to organize this list in a way that helps you notice overlaps or similarities. You can use a table, spreadsheet, mapping, sticky notes, or any other visual that makes sense to you. For example, you may wish to sort the different data collection requirements by grant or funding stream and by the program element they relate to (objective, outcome, output, activity, etc.).

> ***Tip:*** *Involving staff in collaborative program design and M&E planning can ensure they have a say in what data they will collect and when. Securing buy-in from your staff can help justify potentially time- and resource-intensive data collection and analysis. If collaborative planning is not possible, make your theory of change and logframe available to staff and help them understand why the data is being collected.*

Next, take time to reflect on the data your team wants to collect in order to learn about and improve your project. To do so, you could start by revisiting your project goal to remind yourself of your definition of success. Create spaces for all team members to contribute to identifying learning priorities. Previous project reports can also be a useful source of ideas. Add these internal data collection needs to the mapping you created, so you have one location to keep track of both funder requirements and your internal priorities.

Compare and Assess

Now that you have reviewed all data requirements and brainstormed your team's data needs, use your list to begin putting the puzzle pieces together.

Seek out commonalities. Perhaps one of your funders is looking for data on a program outcome that you also think would be helpful for your own learning. Identifying data that both your team and your funder are interested in can decrease the data collection burden on staff.

Look for flexibility. If funder requirements are general enough that there is flexibility on data needs, you can take opportunities to align what you already collect with what the funders want. It is worth taking the time to identify these overlaps, as avoiding collecting unnecessary data can have a significant impact on staff time and capacity.

For example, imagine you work on an economic empowerment project and are awarded a new grant for the same project. Your new funder is asking to learn about the amount of time that caseworkers spend working with clients on finding employment, but they do not specify a way this must be measured. You think the data your new funder requires is similar to data you already collect—namely, the number of clients you serve and the number of case management meetings you have with them. Rather than introduce a new indicator for the number of hours staff spend assisting clients, you may be able to use this existing data.

In an ideal world, you would be able to identify overlap between funder requirements and your team's needs or existing data collection. **However, in some cases, funder requirements may be inflexible and/or distinct from your team's interests.**

Returning to the prior example, imagine that your new funder requires you to measure the number of meetings between caseworkers and clients, documented by detailed case notes, and this is *not* something you already track. Your team would also like to gather client feedback about the usefulness of your services. You know that systematically collecting both pieces of data would increase the team's workload beyond capacity.

Navigating these conflicting data needs is a significant and common challenge in project design. Funder-required indicators will always take priority to ensure program compliance, but there may still be opportunities for internal learning. The rest of this guide proposes tips for balancing collecting data for project improvement with data needed for compliance.

Get Creative About Learning and Action Within Constraints

In the absence of time and capacity to thoughtfully collect and analyze a wide variety of data, you can still work together to identify ways to collect useful data without dramatically increasing workloads.

Collaboratively define the team priorities

Begin by having a candid discussion across the team, including with leadership, about non-negotiable data and the "nice-to-haves" (data that you don't strictly need). Ask staff what data they would like to see prioritized, based on their own perceptions and the results of any participatory consultations with clients, if applicable. Be sure to frame your question in the context of limited time to see what data staff feel is most important to collect.

Return to your project's definition of success as you work to identify priorities. Ensure everyone is aligned on what data will be collected and why. Understanding how data benefits the overall program (e.g., by enabling future funding) can help staff remain engaged.

You may need to make some difficult choices regarding any additional data you want to collect that is not required by funders. Considerations such as staff capacity and budget may determine how much, if any, of this data you collect. If you decide that collecting some data goes beyond your current capacity, document these goals and make a plan for when you will revisit your M&E plan if circumstances change. In the meantime, consider the strategies below to leverage opportunities for learning.

Use what you already have

Now you have mapped out all the data you are required to collect. You have also tried to align it with your own learning interests, where possible, and you have taken a realistic look at team capacity. Next, you want to ensure you have time for learning and action. **Think creatively about what you can learn from the data you are already collecting,** particularly when capacity does not allow you to collect additional data for learning purposes.

Returning to the prior example of the economic empowerment project, your team may not have time to implement the project activities, track the number of meetings (as required by your funder), and collect systematic client feedback about the quality and usefulness of the employment-focused case management services. Because tracking the number of meetings is required by the funder, you must prioritize this over collecting client feedback. While this may be disappointing, there are likely still lessons to be learned from the data you do collect. For example, here are some ways you might use the data about the number of meetings between caseworkers and clients:

- Determine whether clients who attended more case management meetings were more likely to obtain employment (using the detailed case notes to identify which clients found employment);
- Assess your project's retention rate by analyzing how the number of case management meetings varied over time;
- Inform future staffing plans for similar projects.

Tip: *Analyzing demographic data (such as age, gender, ethnicity, etc.) can help your team get more from required or existing data.* ***Disaggregating*** *the information your funder requires can help you assess the impact of your project on different target groups, such as youth, elderly persons, women, or people of different ethnicities. You can use this information to improve future programs.*

Explore strategies for learning that accommodate limited capacity

If, after walking through the steps above, you still feel there is additional data that would be meaningful to collect but don't want to overburden staff, try to look for small ways you can collect this data.

Organize focus groups. You can choose to hold focus groups only occasionally, when you have the capacity to do so. This can provide you with some of the data you might receive through a more systematic feedback survey but reduce the time it would take to design, administer, and analyze the survey results.

Incorporate small-scale data collection into existing project activities. Consider using simple questions as icebreakers for project activities. For example, you might ask how many people have implemented the tools introduced in a previous session, or ask people to rate their comfort level with the day's topic on a scale from one to three. This can be done without additional tools, such as via a show of hands, or with minimal tools, like with colored or numbered cards for different response options. This can give your team information about clients' experiences with the project without adding to their schedules.

Take notes on observations. Project staff can take turns noting their own observations from activities, such as client reactions to different types of programming and attendance patterns.

Establish suggestion boxes. Creating opportunities for clients to submit feedback at their own pace can be a convenient way to collect data without diverting much staff time. Feedback can be reviewed at established intervals, such as during team meetings.

Use data review and "lessons learned" meetings with staff to discuss the activities of the last quarter or year. Sharing data can be gratifying for the team, as they can see the impact of their hard work with clients. Reflecting on data together can lead to new insights you can use to improve your program design in the future.

Look for efficiencies in data collection and management

Efficient systems to collect and manage data can be significant time savers. Standardizing data collection methods and using tools to organize information can help avoid gathering more data than you need.

Structuring data efficiently will make it easier to identify trends, which can speed up analysis and learning.

Consider alternative data sources, such as timesheets or billing trackers, which might provide information on program activities (especially regarding timing and attendance). Staff other than caseworkers may also have client-facing duties, during which they could solicit feedback in the form of a one-question survey, for example.

Tracking the data in a shared database can also help catch data entry errors early on. This can help avoid time-consuming data cleaning processes that can sometimes arise just before reporting.

Take the time to **consider what existing templates and documentation requirements have to offer.** If your team is already using specific software or forms to document their work, harness this for data management purposes rather than requiring staff to track this information separately in a different database.

Utilize technology where appropriate to automate processes that may be labor-intensive if done manually. For example, if digital literacy levels permit, linking a QR code to a one-question survey rather than using a paper suggestion box could capture feedback directly in a shared spreadsheet, avoiding the need for staff to type in or copy over client feedback.

Remember that you can always go back and adjust M&E plans. Use brainstorming sessions and the feedback you gather to refine your systems. If you find efficiencies in your M&E systems, this may free up time to collect additional data from your "nice to have" list.

Conclusion

Funders often require project staff to collect specific data, while leaders or teams may desire other information to inform project implementation. Given capacity constraints, it can be difficult to balance these needs. After examining data collection requirements, you may need to scale back your ambitions for gathering non-required data. Still, by following the steps above, you can ensure that you are collecting the data necessary to meet funder requirements, finding creative ways to collect additional data for learning, and keeping staff workloads healthy and manageable.

Additional Resources

Collecting and Analyzing Data for Learning and Program Improvement: This Switchboard guide explains the importance of data-driven programs, how to set a learning agenda for collecting purposeful data, and how to develop a data analysis plan.

Practical Strategies for Collecting and Incorporating Client Feedback Data: This Switchboard archived webinar addresses best practices for developing surveys to obtain client feedback that you can use to evaluate your program.

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