

Bridging the Gap—A Guide to monitoring and evaluating development projects

Performance Measurement

# Bridging the Gap

*A Guide to monitoring and  
evaluating development projects*

Bernard Broughton & Jonathan Hampshire

learning  
Donor  
Project Framework  
Participation  
Data  
Support  
Partners  
Management  
Information  
Indicators  
Surveys





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## PREFACE

*“No, no there is nothing in the world that can be imagined in advance, not the slightest thing. Everything is made up of so many unique particulars that are impossible to foresee. In imagination, we pass over them in our haste and don’t notice that they’re missing. But realities are slow and indescribably detailed.”*

Rainer Maria Rilke

“Why have you come here?” The elderly village man held me with his steady gaze. I began to explain to him about the feasibility study and its different aspects, but he politely cut me off. “Why have you come here?” As a question this was both a gift and a challenge. It was a gift because he was recognising me as a person, an individual. It was a challenge in that, before this old man was prepared to relate to me in any meaningful way, he wanted to make contact with me as a person, to know I was real, somebody who could be trusted with the truth as he saw it.

In our efforts to comply with the increasing pressures of bureaucracy and to be accountable to a wide range of stakeholders, there is always the danger that we may forget that development is first and foremost about people, and that we too are people! If we enter any situation and simply appear to be a sort of ‘information vacuum cleaner’, it is likely that the information we obtain will be of questionable value. However if we enter into a village or community with curiosity, humility and some useful tools, we will come away with insights into the realities of local people, as well as ourselves. In answering this old man’s question I remembered again that true development always flows in both directions.

As project managers, the personnel of Australian NGOs have to be many different things to different people. They are at the centre of a broad web of relationships (see illustration page 9). The numerous stakeholders to whom they relate, and to whom they are variously accountable, represent different cultures, perceptions and realities. It is the job of the project manager to act as an interpreter, a translator from one reality to the next, to bridge a number of different gaps.

There is the gap between data, information and knowledge. Data by itself is very often meaningless, it requires the application of specific analysis to turn it into information if we are to learn anything. The skills required to undertake this sort of analysis can be taught. But then information is often contradictory, confusing or simply nonsensical. It requires a broader process of analysis that considers the wider context of a project, bringing understanding to the information thus converting it to knowledge. The skills required to do this can be partially taught, but they also come from exposure and experience.

There is one final step, a step rarely achieved, but worth pursuing. That is the process of knowledge becoming wisdom. For this to take place it is necessary to ‘sit with’ the knowledge in a non-judgmental way, to tune into the background culture from which the knowledge is emerging, and to listen to what people are both telling and not telling. This process of contemplation, ‘deep listening’ and intuition can sometimes lead to a depth of insight which amounts to wisdom. Knowledge used with wisdom leads to rapid learning. Changes undertaken with this level of insight have a sound foundation.

Another gap to be bridged is that between stakeholders. This gap is multifaceted in nature, it can be geographic, cultural, perceptual and linguistic. The sheer fact of distance creates a gap. Anybody who has worked for any length of time in a field office will be aware of the gap that exists. It constantly threatens clear communication, between a head office and the field, even though the occupants may be from the same culture. As someone traveling back and forth between these two organisational entities it is the job of the project manager to shrink this gap as much as possible. Then there are the actual cultural differences. The obvious one will be between Australian culture and the culture of the recipient group. Cultural sensitivity and cross cultural communication skills are vital. But there is also the need for understanding the cultural differences between an Australian NGO and, for example, AusAID. This is an organisational cultural gap which must also be handled with empathy and sensitivity.

In terms of the actual work, there are always gaps between project plans or designs and the realities of day-to-day implementation. This is where the role of monitoring, review and evaluation are really very important. If these activities, and the systems to support them, are in place and regularly undertaken, the gap between plans and project realities will not become too great. This provides a constant checking mechanism which allows either plans or activities to be appropriately adjusted, thus reducing this gap.

Lastly, there is the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of NGOs. The rhetoric of most agencies states that their stance and their vision is based on the realities of the day-to-day life for ordinary people at the grassroots level. Unless these stances, policies and visions are regularly checked against that reality, the link between what an agency describes as reality and the reality itself will grow increasingly tenuous. It is the job of the project manager to provide information to the organisation about the realities of its field work.

If we are to bridge all of these gaps effectively there are a number of things that must be done. We must be clear about who the various stakeholders are, and clear about their information needs. Monitoring and evaluation should take a systems approach which emphasises minimum information. This is in order to ensure that the energy invested in establishing and maintaining such a system is warranted, in terms of the information and understanding gained from it. Lastly, in order to be able to do this Australian NGO staff need a set of practical monitoring and evaluation tools and the ability to pass these on to partners as part of their role in training and supporting local counterpart organisations.

The book you hold in your hands may not be able to furnish you with the curiosity or humility, but it most definitely will provide you with many of the useful tools. Bernard Broughton, Jonathan Hampshire, and Julie Smith who supplied the wonderful cartoons, are all *real* people writing from real experience. Between these lines you can hear the village chickens scratching and smell the smoke from the cooking fires. The techniques outlined here are a powerful mix of approaches, mostly participatory, adapted by the authors through their own experience, in numerous communities throughout many countries.

As this Guide makes clear, the project manager is someone who requires skills in a number of disciplines. The work undertaken often spans several vastly different perceptions of reality. The reality of village people struggling, usually with great good humor and forbearance, with the daily needs of survival. The realities and values of Australian NGOs and their struggle to create a world of greater justice, tolerance, opportunity and choice. And the reality of bureaucrats from funding bodies coping with political directives, complex systems and stringent accountability. In all of this the project manager is an envoy between different realities. This requires skills of diplomacy and communication, but perhaps above all else, the ability to empathise.

Documents such as this one are dynamic in nature and never complete. New understandings and insights are always emerging. It is hoped that those who use the Guide will adapt the techniques further themselves. I would like to think that in two or three years a new, improved edition might be produced which would include some of the insights, stories and tools that people have discovered or used in their own work. I therefore encourage readers and practitioners to send any such materials to the Australian Council For Overseas Aid for possible inclusion in a new edition.

It is fitting to remember that we are involved in an endeavour that is difficult but worthwhile. The person who strains after rapid or instant success will find his or her best intentioned efforts frustrated. At the heart of the development process, be it the development of a society or our own unfolding journey, is patience.

Mike Crooke

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