

Seminar Summary Day 1: Creating an Enabling Environment for M&E Community of Practice

We had a very busy first day of our 5-day seminar on creating an enabling environment to strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) practice for HIV/ AIDS and other health programs. As we concluded the first day, 115 LeaderNauts from 33 countries in 4 continents visited the site today, and 34 of you made 55 posts. Indeed, this is an accomplishment that should make all of us proud. We would encourage the rest of you to post and share your experiences and insights. This is your platform – please use it, learn from it.

You have all acknowledged that M&E is absolutely critical in today's global and national environment, with a growing demand and sharper focus on effectiveness, results, accountability, and impact from governments and donors. As such, M&E is more than just meeting certain reporting requirements – it is an essential field of its own necessary to monitor and shape the direction and evaluate the impact of our programs. If done well, it's also a management tool that can be utilized to track and demonstrate results, guide resource allocation and also help to make a compelling case for resource mobilization.

When we ignore or fail to invest adequately in our M&E system, the consequences are obvious. **Dr Adirieje in Nigeria** reminds us that, “a compromised M&E system is the unfortunate dividend of ineffective management systems and poor leadership.” **Nsorma** in neighboring **Ghana** throws in a HR-related caution: “With a frustrated and de-motivated M&E unit, M&E would not be successful.” **Isidor in the Philippines** adds: “Without an enabling organizational environment, it will be difficult to determine what the organization needs to monitor and evaluate in a project/program.”

Linah in Kenya laments that, “unfortunately the M&E function in some cases is not well appreciated and seen as a form of compliance without quite seeing the value it adds,” while **Nicholas in Nigeria** warns us about the danger of failure to invest in our M&E system: “... it will collapse and possibly create false data if we fail to give it all it requires for such services.”

Velida in Bosnia and Herzegovina, aptly adds: “If there is no enabling environment, the entire effort of M&E unit will be wasted, decision-making will be intuitive rather than based on and informed by data; the M&E unit will be disconnected from the rest of the organization thus creating numerous management and programming related problems.” And **Emily in Zambia** concludes this discussion thread rather well: “...leaving our organizations to 'shoot in the dark' rather than make informed decisions based on data/evidence.”

Obviously, there are many efforts underway to improve the quality and effectiveness of M&E. In many places, national governments, donor agencies and individual organizations are working together to standardize M&E processes, train and update the technical skills of M&E professionals, and offer a variety of technical tools, data collection instruments and frameworks. We also know that organizations are at different stages of development in their M&E capacity. But there are many organizational and system-related challenges that need to be overcome in building these systems.

Building and maintaining any system is primarily an organizational and change management process. It requires commitment, time and resources – as well as effective champions – but it is doable. While

there is no one “correct” way to go about building a fully functioning M&E system, as many of you noted, the organizational functions outlined in the framework are all essential in this process. Kenneth in Uganda honestly shared the experience of his own organization: “the organization does not have a clear and inclusive process for decision-making, at least there is no consistently followed approach being that key stakeholders may not always be consulted. In part, too, communication mechanisms are not followed consistently by all staff, at various levels of the organization.”

Velida in Bosnia and Herzegovina also captured the critical role of leadership and governance:

“...leadership and governance in my opinion is of crucial importance for effective and sustainable functioning. All other functional areas are directly influenced by this one.” In many ways, introducing change or changing the way people work is a sociological challenge – not a technical one. As such, it’s important to build that leadership involvement in all our M&E strengthening efforts, and supporting those leaders to make change.

Several posts also highlighted the importance of partnerships and networking in creating an enabling environment for stronger M&E practice. It’s important to remember that partnerships take time to develop and need energy to sustain. Most importantly, it’s crucial for partners to build trust and spirit of team work. Creating effective M&E partnerships requires that we pay attention to a few important steps:

- Defining the potential partners in strengthening the system
- Defining key priorities for each partner and assessing what is needed in terms of financial and human resources
- Reaching consensus on roles and responsibilities, including leadership
- In some instances, you may need to agree on a common platform to share information, including plans and progress reports.

In a nutshell, building effective partnerships requires that all interested parties buy into a common goal and agree to use at least non-duplicative approaches to attain the goal.

Finally, tomorrow (Day 2 of the seminar) we shall further explore HOW to foster an enabling environment to strengthen our M&E systems, especially the role of capacity building interventions and resources that are required.