

Making Monitoring Simple and Useful

by Kathleen Shordt

Unfortunately, many water and sanitation projects do not provide the benefits originally envisaged. The success of projects depends on necessary preconditions which might include: adequate design relevant to the situation and responding to demand; affordability; sustained functioning and maintenance; community organisation and management; behaviours (use and hygiene). It was recognised in the 1980s that these conditions should be a central focus of monitoring activities.

‘Monitoring’ traditionally referred to checking how projects are being implemented and resources used. Routine data systems have been set up for this. At best this information is used to influence operational changes and to direct maintenance and purchase. At worst, information from monitoring has simply been ignored.

Beginning in the 1980’s, the focus of monitoring (and evaluation) began to shift toward the assessment of ‘functioning’ and ‘utilization’ of services.¹ Monitoring began to cover not only measures of inputs but also measures of ‘lower order outputs’ (for example, construction) and measures ‘higher order outputs’ (for example, the sustained use of services and behavioural change).² Monitoring activities are meant to feed directly into decision-making-- to improve project performance over the short-term and influence the impact over the long-term.

Another change has been the recognition that monitoring can serve more than the decision-making needs of a small management group. More partners can be brought into the process of using the monitoring results. This would mean, for example, feeding the results about the functioning water points back to the lowest level that takes immediate action.

Monitoring for efficiency and effectiveness

In water and sanitation programmes it is important to define clearly certain key variables that can be used to measure efficiency and effectiveness. There are many possible issues for which indicators can be developed related to planning and design, community

organization, training, involvement of women, hygiene practices, water quality, functioning, use, cost sharing or cost recovery.⁴

However, many organizations concerned with water and environmental sanitation are at a disadvantage in dealing with variables requiring detailed knowledge of users and schemes that can cover hundreds or thousands of kilometres. With limited field staff, it is difficult to survey, make plans, collect reports and monitor for large populations or over wide areas. The same, or nearly the same, is true for local governments, local boards and committees which manage water and sanitation projects. The involvement of those groups who have a vested interest in monitoring would seem to be a logical solution. This would include mid-level, implementation and extension staff, members of local management organizations, NGOs and, particularly, community members.

Monitoring is best conducted in partnership between project staff, local government and community members.⁵ It stimulates two-way flow of information between communities and agencies, and helps ensure that programmes can adapt and change to fit local circumstances. However, in large schemes which have complex designs, participatory monitoring does not replace other forms of monitoring, such as financial auditing. It is complementary.

Basic monitoring principles

There are several basic considerations to help ensure that monitoring is efficient and useful. Lack of careful advanced planning may result in collection of meaningless data or the production of reports that are never used. Detailed planning at the outset, with all parties, will help ensure the impact of the monitoring work to the satisfaction of community groups and service providers. Some guidelines for this include:

- Consult the communities. What monitoring issues are of interest to the communities? Plan also for feedback of data to the community.
- Consult the management of the service. What issues are of interest? In what form and at what levels will monitoring information be acceptable and likely to be used?

- Plan for the use of monitoring information from the beginning. Plan the internal flow of information from the outset. At the outset determine what purpose the information will serve.
- Target the monitoring. Don't try to cover all possible topics in monitoring.
- It is necessary to have indicators that can easily and cheaply be measured. In data collection it is better to be almost correct, cheap and timely rather than exact, expensive and too late.
- Keep the data analysis as simple as possible and ensure that the information does not become blurred through data processing. Straightforward data is more convincing.
- Plan for training or orientation of all those who collect and may use the data. This should include training to ensure validity and reliability in data collection.
- Combine qualitative and quantitative monitoring.

Such practical approaches to monitoring which involve stakeholders can offer several benefits. These have been demonstrated in various projects and include: reducing per capita costs and ensuring financial sustainability; better service levels including repairs; improving access for groups in greatest need; improved use and hygiene; helping to ensure greater use of safe water.

References

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