IMPROVING RESULTS BASED MONITORING IN NGOS AND CSRS

Abstract

In order to achieve the sustainable developmental goals efficiently, a coordinated action will be needed from multiple actors such as NGOs, CSRs, government, and research organizations. This coordinated action is possible with an aligned understanding of the goals, indicators to track them, and tools to measure them. Therefore, data driven programming and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) becomes a linchpin. NEERMAN conducted a formative qualitative research to understand current practices, priorities and needs for data-driven programming and M&E for NGOs and CSRs. We find that M&E is practiced in some extent and form in all organizations but the purpose, use and actual systems may not be conducive for coordinated action or even programming that is relevant, effective, and efficient. We make a case for investment by government, multilaterals, and larger funders to promote the use of robust monitoring systems, as well as provide capacity building support to CSRs and NGOs. At the same time, we recommend NGOs and CSRs to distinguish between evaluation and monitoring and prioritise structured, agile, and technology-based monitoring system.

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Improving Results based Monitoring in NGOs and CSRs

Introduction

CSR organizations (CSRs) and NGOs play a pivotal role in achieving the development objectives, as enablers and supporters of large private or public programmes. The cue for development priorities is often driven by government priorities which are themselves driven by India's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDGs pose a challenge which can be faced if actions of all stakeholders, from top policymakers to the grass-root level NGO workers, are coordinated towards achieving the common objectives. In other words, achieving SDGs requires the partnership of governments, private sector, civil society, and citizens, which would go beyond business-as-usual only with a similar sense of goals and mechanisms to measure progress towards these goals.

It flows naturally that monitoring systems will play a critical role in setting programme objectives aligned with SDGs, using indicators which are standard and useful, and setting targets to be achieved in a programme life cycle. The monitoring system can also bring in much-needed accountability as well as a sense of urgency to achieve development objectives and identify and address process failures sooner. Further, evaluations combined with monitoring (M&E systems) can help organizations innovate and find ways to be more effective and efficient, and even demonstrate success for additional funding and scaling.

However, presently, it largely remains unknown whether and to what extent is M&E used in CSRs and NGOs. The questions extend to how CSRs and NGOs approach M&E philosophically and methodologically, how they use the findings; and what gaps need to be addressed.

The objective of this exploratory study is to find an answer to the above questions using qualitative research tools. The methods and scope of the research preclude us from making any robust or generalizable recommendations. However, findings from the study do help us form hypothesis and generate recommendations about what might improve the current situation.

This study finds that the importance of M&E is not missing in NGOs and CSRs and that the use of data is extensive. However, these approaches are ad-hoc, rarely driven by sound research principles, and not conducive to track progress towards SDGs. A lot more and long-term effort is required for capacity building of NGOs and CSRs to design, implement and use results-based monitoring systems, properly integrated qualitative and quantitative research methods, and gain efficiency and scale in M&E with use of technology.

Methodology

The study was a mix of (1) qualitative in-depth interviews with purposively identified CSR and NGO programme staff, M&E specialists, and heads of the organization, and (2) short structured survey with a purposive sample of CSR heads and NGO M&E officers. The study was conducted during May and June 2020 (Covid-19 lockdown period) using NEERMAN's internal research funds.

We conducted eight in-depth interviews using a pre-tested discussion guide and covered themes such as existing M&E systems, use of data-evidence in decision making, relationship between funders and implementing organization, and challenges faced in designing or using M&E in programming. The discussion guide was finalized after multiple iterations and mock interviews. The sample size was sufficient for a qualitative research as saturation was achieved.

The interviews were conducted as virtual e-meetings after administering informed consent for interview and recording. The recordings were later transcribed and interpreted by a group of three researchers to ensure inter-researcher reliability.

After identifying major findings by key themes, we sought to collect more data in a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed based on the discussion guide and the variation in the answers from the IDIs. The 15-minute questionnaire was developed on open-data-kit based e-survey platform and rolled over social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp). Initially, we expected to snowball to a sample of 200. However, despite repeated reminders we achieved sample of 34 with only 7 from CSR organizations and rest from NGOs.

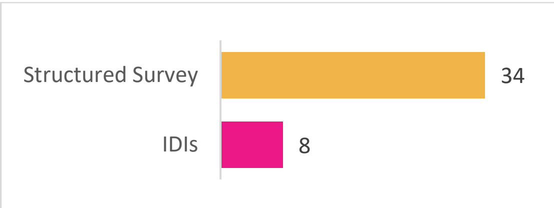

Figure 1: Sample size

As the sample achieved was purposive and limited, the data from structured questionnaire was mainly used to validate and refine the findings from the IDIs. It was also not intended as a random representative survey for statistical inference.

Results and Findings

The study found several broad challenges which we have organized under two headings: (1) programme design and planning; and (2) development and use of M&E systems.

Programme Designing and Targeting

Figure 2 lists top three gaps identified by our study. Figure 3 presents frequency of responses from structured survey on critical challenges in programme design phase.

Selection of implementation partners was a critical need felt by few funding NGOs/CSRs. Especially for a new or small-size CSR or funding agency, it is challenging to find and trust an implementation partner (local NGO). Similarly, for an entrant NGO, opportunities are limited, given their little experience and financial background. As a result, some CSRs preferred to 'donate' their funds to PM Cares, or other such government funds allowed under the CSR Act. They recognized that they were not acting in the spirit of the act but could not help.

Selection of implementation partners

Independently assessing quality of data and needs assessment

Availability of secondary/external data

Figure 2: Top three challenges in programme design and planning stage

CSRs and NGOs felt a need for a platform which can work as a marketplace for NGOs and CSRs where they can ascertain the credentials credibly. Majority of CSR organizations lamented the absence of a credible system to select, assess and review NGO partners.

We also inquired about awareness of NGO Darpan; a platform by NITI Aayog where NGOs register and upload their data. Most respondents were not aware of NGO Darpan or any such portal. Those who were aware did not use it because they found it unreliable. When we explored whether and how government-operated NGO Darpan can be a potential platform, there were mainly two suggestions. First, the government needs to assure the credibility of the NGOs registering on the system in terms of their FCRA clearance, Aadhaar, past project experience, and turnover. And second, reflect performance rating by past clients or provide a reference for past clients. An NGO suggested that NGO Darpan can be used as a marketplace where all CSRs can advertise their projects, so there is a fair chance for all NGOs to compete.

Another challenge lies in targeting investments where the need is most acute. Most NGOs in the study reported doing some situation analysis of needs assessment before designing any programme. However, the funding agencies and CSRs are often not able to verify these assessments independently and take the NGO assessments on their face value. Majority of CSRs expressed that they would prefer to form their understanding of the needs of a region, and what is the best way to serve those needs. While CSRs appreciated the expertise of NGOs in identifying local problems, there was also natural discomfort among donors in accepting what NGOs propose at face value or to believe that the proposed approach was the best suited.

Due to the limited knowledge of the development problems and solutions, the CSRs and funding agencies end up staying at arm's length. This reason often limited the role of CSRs in providing funding and monitoring its proper use, but not in bringing the efficiency of 'corporates' in achieving results.

When we explored solutions, few funding organizations suggested a platform where they can identify development needs at grass root (village) level, work done in these places, and existing programmes/platforms for CSRs to chip. Another suggestion was to build the capacity of smaller CSRs and NGOs in evaluation research to do a proper needs assessment, programme design, and reviewing programme proposals by NGOs. A related challenge identified by NGOs and CSRs alike is (un)availability of secondary data. A lot of NGOs stated that if they had government data at village or "unit" level available to them, they could purposively choose villages with more critical needs and target resources there. As noted previously, even CSRs had expressed the same need to target their funds correctly.

Currently, most NGOs use their experience and knowledge of the area to select villages to work. Whereas some believed working in any district/region is useful because India's development gaps are vast, and there is always "tons of work to be done".

We asked whether they made any to use existing data courses such as Census, NFHS and monitoring data of various government programmes. A few NGOs reported using Census and Swachh Bharat Mission monitoring data, but no one had used (and many unaware of) NFHS. Two organizations tried using NFHS but found it too complex to download and analyse. They instead used the reports and factsheets but only in writing grant proposal because the summary was at state/district level.

A few organizations hired external consultants to analyse secondary data from their past projects or other sources. However, the analysis did not provide them with the answers they needed to do programming.

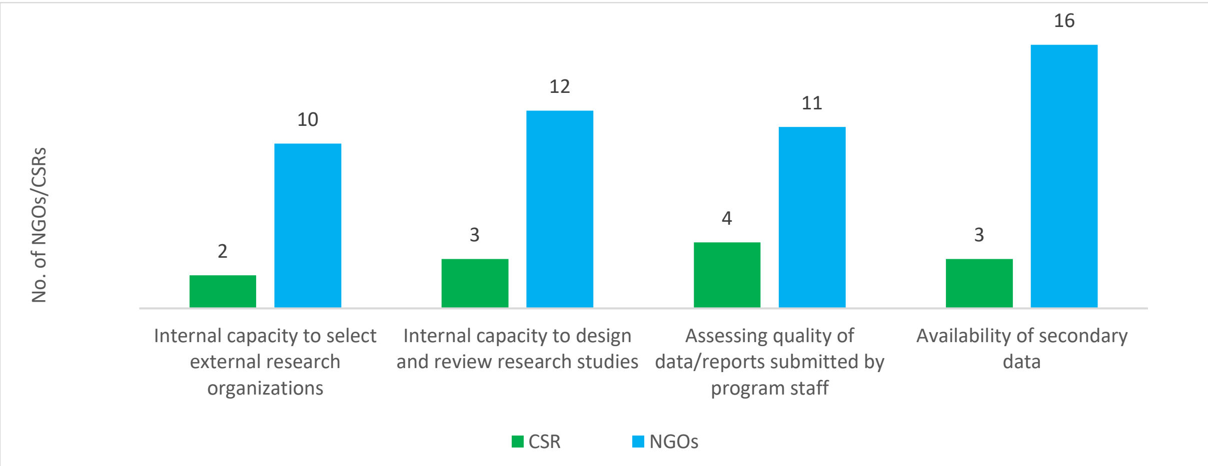

Figure 3: Major challenges in the programme planning and targeting stage (n=34)

Design and Implementation of M&E

Figure 4 summarizes four categories of challenges associated with design and use of M&E systems. Figure 5 tabulate responses of the structured survey related to challenges in using M&E system.

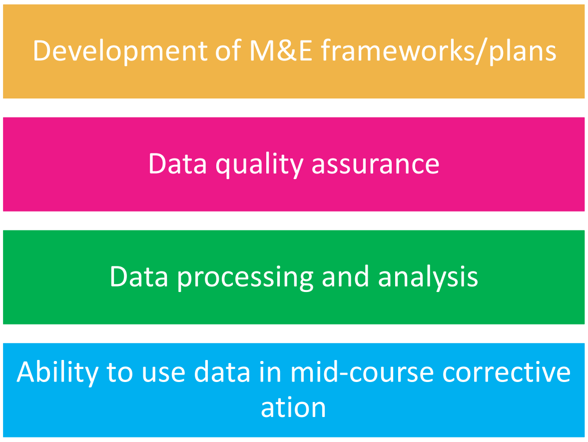

Figure 4: Top four challenges in design and implementation of M&E systems

Almost all the respondents **identified as a significant gap ability to develop M&E frameworks and plans**. This gap was mainly due to lack of know-how, belief in ad-hoc approaches, belief in 'trust-based programming', and the hands-off role played by funders in developing monitoring systems (disinterest or no funding). At the same time, almost all organizations reported doing some monitoring by the programme implementation staff and all funders reported at least site-visits. While few implementing organizations had robust data-driven monitoring systems, some just reported data in any format required by the funder (and funder rarely asked to support/validate those numbers). About one-fifth of the organizations also hired external M&E agencies, but most said that the findings helped in donor reporting but not in improvement of the programme.

The importance of monitoring as programme implementation and management tool is very well-appreciated. What lacked was a monitoring system that focused on results or theory of change, quantitative indicators measurable as a part of routine programme implementation, formal review mechanisms for course correction and enforcing accountability. There were poor linkages between activities of the programme and expected outcomes, over-committed or lofty targets,

Another concern to most NGOs and CSRs was **the inability to check and assure the quality of monitoring data** submitted by implementing staff or even external survey agencies. While efforts are taken by senior staff to visit the sites, to conduct training of staff, and to invest in the technology, there are often disagreements internally or with funders about multiple data quality concerns. For example, concerns regarding the reliability of the data, whether tools are appropriate for the indicators, logical fallacies with past data or data from other centers. Some of the other gaps reported were, hiring of external enumerators who are professional and experienced, their training, developing questionnaires and forms to collect high-quality data.

On the other hand, most NGOs were comfortable in designing the questionnaires and data collection systems on their own and only needed some training and handholding support. Many organizations reported using mobile-based data collection software to improve the quality of data collection. Larger organizations reported having competitive processes to select their external monitoring partners.

When we explored the role of external monitoring organization, implementing organizations felt that insights are better when monitoring data is collected by programme teams themselves. A few funders agreed, but a few funders felt that external agencies assured objectivity which their board needed. Overall, we found some extent of a conflict between the use of the monitoring system as a programme implementation/improvement tool versus its use as an audit tool.

(In)Ability to manage, process and analyze monitoring data was a need by almost all organizations, including organizations who were satisfied with the quality and quantity of the monitoring data they collect. Approximately two-thirds of the NGOs reported a lack of internal capacity to process and analyze the data beyond simple tabulations. Most organizations used Excel, but the use of statistical or data dashboards/visualization software was limited. Several organizations reported that they invest in external experts to analyze the data and generate useful reports, but the more resources spent in this area, longer is the wait to get the analysis reports. Therefore, such expert analyses are not of much use when delayed. Instead, few organizations relied on grass root level staff to identify problems and even provide a solution.

While many reported a high level of unmet need on analysis of monitoring data, not many examples were forthcoming when asked how such advance analysis can help the programme if this need was addressed.

Another gap was in 'use' of M&E data/evidence in decision making and course-correction action. Most organizations are reporting some data (narrative reports, monitoring reports) to various internal stakeholders and funders. Therefore, the accountability concern of 'proper use of funds' is mostly addressed.

What is absent is a formal review mechanism to use monitoring data or evaluation reports in taking corrective actions at various stages of the programme. About three-fourths NGOs reported that they either do not get the data or cannot use the data to take 'timely' decisions.

Many implementers also reported that funders are not open to course correction, and thus reports are used as a contractual obligation. Most of the funders and CSR organizations felt they were accountable to their board or higher management, which insisted on hard evidence that the programme is working, but not necessarily on the process or course correction required. On the other side, managers from CSR and funders reported that during programme sites visits, they review all interim data/reports by NGOs, partake in corrective action discussions and are also open to course correction or changing the contract to reflect any new ground realities.

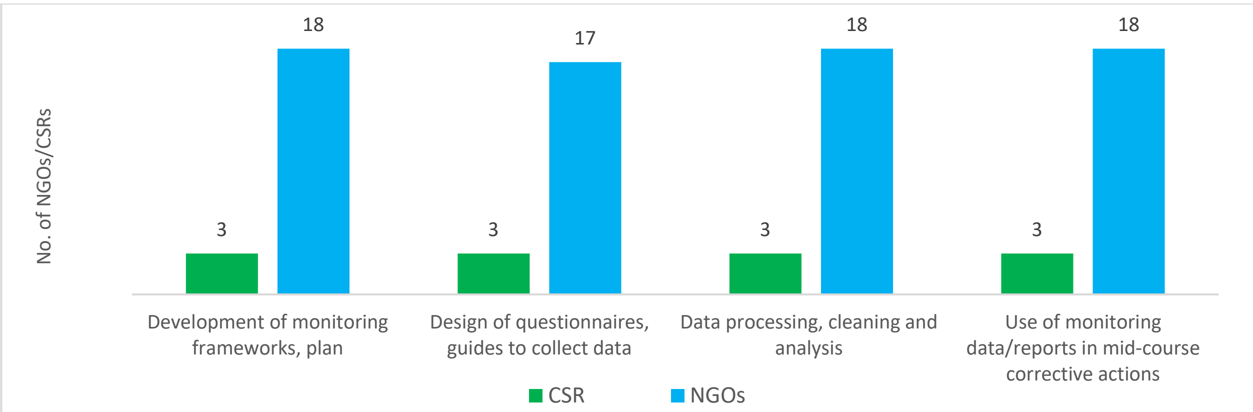

Figure 5: Major challenges identified in the design and implementation of M&E systems (n=34)

Learnings and Recommendations

Almost all organizations in the study practised monitoring in some form and used monitoring as an improvement tool. The challenge is not creating demand for data and evidence-driven programming but to do it in a way which is helpful, accountable, and efficient. The skills and knowledge that are useful for monitoring systems or conducting research that can generate actionable insights are limited to a few organizations and experts. But a lot more can happen if the ecosystem for development can come together. In this spirit, NEERMAN identified following priority action areas for key stakeholders (Figure 6).

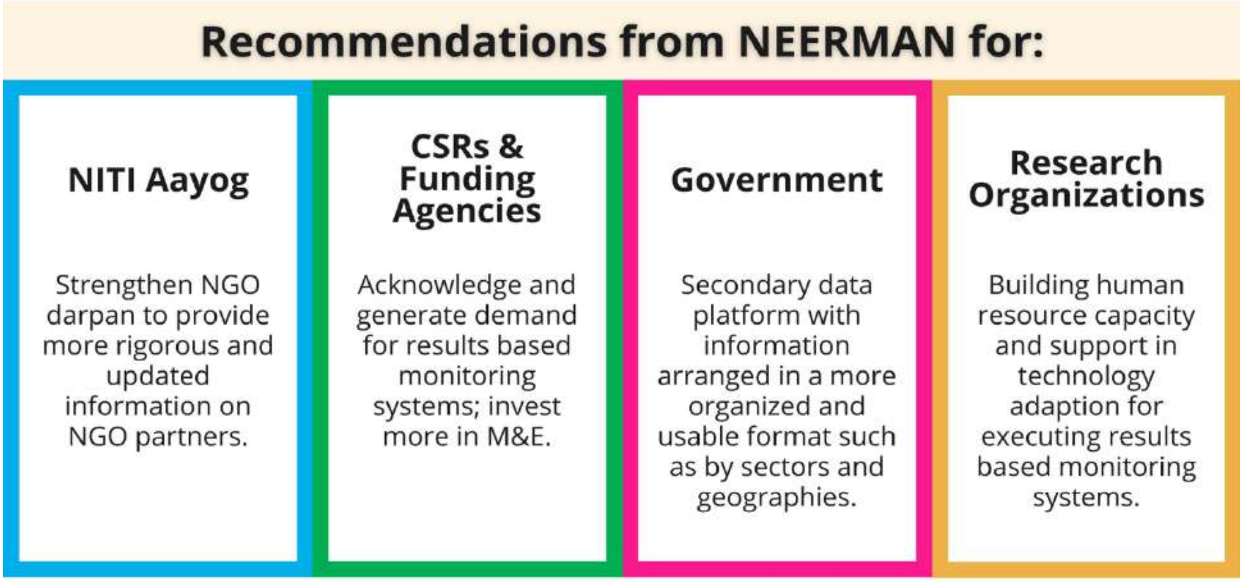

Figure 6: Recommendations

(1) A common platform for credible information on NGO partners. Currently, NGO Darpan by NITI Aayog has a list of over 90,000 NGOs from pan India registered with basic information on their geographies and activities. However, to make this data directly usable for funding agencies, more regular and rigorous validation of the data is called for. This can be done by mandating NGOs to enter more detailed information such as their turnover, workforce, descriptions and assessments of projects, review from funders on an annual basis. This system can be made more interactive to let funders and NGOs rate each other, update impact reports in a standardized and useful manner, create a knowledge-hub.

We believe NITI Ayog is mandated to and indeed a natural choice for implementing this recommendation under its office for development evaluation.

(2) **Government-owned and operated micro-data platform with information organized well by sectors and geographies.** Multiple stakeholders need timely and microdata to take aligned decisions and coordinate action. Websites such as data.gov.in are useful only to a limited extent because of its 'voluntary' nature, poor organization and search features and exclusion of monitoring data for various government programmes. At the least, the government should make available microdata at GP/Village/Ward level for multiple SDG related indicators, gaps from the targets, top priority sectors/indicators. It should also provide data on government schemes, support, staff available at micro-level for NGOs to leverage.

Currently, NITI Aayog publishes top-level summary on SDG progress across India but Even if this data is updated once a year. But many of these indicators are presentable at the village, Panchayat, PHC and other levels if the monitoring systems are connected on a common platform to report, say, 5-10 basic indicators for all programmes monthly.

We again feel that NITI Ayog is a natural choice to develop and host such a platform. However, given sensitivities in sharing data across ministries and departments, we have made it a recommendation for 'national government'.

(3) Invest in integrated results-oriented, technology-driven, and 'quantitative' M&E systems with programme design and implementation from the get-go. This recommendation is for CSR and funding organizations to invest in, and insist on a theory-driven, results-based monitoring system. Presently, most programmes undergo a more qualitative ad-hoc monitoring, which is essentially evaluation; not monitoring. This finding was a surprise given most funders have corporate backgrounds where measured performance has been a cornerstone of measuring success. Corporates are familiar with concepts such as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) or Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) which is essentially monitoring for results.

Sometimes monitoring can seem inflexible when donors harden stance on outputs and outcomes committed. The monitoring systems also do not account for how local contexts can negate a previously well-thought plan. But incorporating flexibility in terms of mid-term review and course correction based on evidence and data can meet the dual objective of accountability and flexibility.

Finally, while awareness of technology or software for monitoring is high, it is no use to any reasonable level of potential. While there may be a fixed cost to design monitoring framework, the software development is actually not that costly due to several open source and free platforms. However, donors appear hesitant to allocate funds for software development and procurement, and NGOs seem to invest in expensive customized software instead of plug-n-play systems available (ODK, CommCare, SurveyCTO).

(4) Investment in building capacity of NGOs and CSRs to develop, implement and use the monitoring systems. Most NGOs anticipated that 5-10% of the programme budget should be allocated to M&E. But almost all CSRs and NGOs agreed that sufficient funds are not available for a systematic and comprehensive monitoring system. One reason for this is the reliance on external monitoring agencies which can be expensive and frankly less useful to 'improve' the programme. Our interviews found a few cases where the budget of external monitoring agencies was almost 50% of the total programme funding!

Most CSRs relied on third party monitoring, which is monitoring for contractual accountability and not for results. Most NGOs used (rightly) the programme staff for monitoring purposes so that some of the monitoring costs were internalized into the programme costs. However, most NGOs also lacked skills and capacity for designing monitoring systems, tech-based data collection, data processing and aggregation, data analysis, visualization, and correct interpretation of findings to take corrective actions. They perceived these tasks as daunting without an external agency. Quite often, NGOs and CSRs are confused between the two terms - monitoring and evaluation – and end up mixing the two and making the design too complex to call in external professional help.

But who shall invest in the capacity of NGOs and implementing organizations or smaller CSRs to do results-based monitoring (evaluation is optional)? We were unable to find free courses or resources which were practicable and accessible for average NGO programme person. Most of the available resources are highly theoretical and intended for researchers, not practitioners.

In our opinion, only large foundations, and multilateral organizations such as the UN agencies or development banks have the financial bandwidth, mandate and expertise to develop resources and fund capacity building of larger development ecosystem. Universities such as national open university can also be supported to design and conduct short practitioner focus modules on M&E. Finally, organizations such as NEERMAN can try to make knowledge and knowhow more accessible to NGO practitioners. Indeed, we are already making several resources freely available on our website on a priority basis and are committed to developing more resources.

About Us

NEERMAN is a research organization that specializes in impact evaluations, programme evaluations, monitoring & evaluation systems development, and allied evaluation and policy research. NEERMAN partners with UN agencies, international foundations, NGOs, and CSRs to conduct impact evaluations, develop monitoring and evaluation systems, and policy research to aid programming. To know more about us, please visit www.neerman.org.