

Quality criteria for monitoring in development cooperation

Working paper of the "Monitoring" working group
of the Development Policy and Humanitarian Aid Section,
Society for Evaluation (DeGEval)¹

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The idea for this working paper arose during the preparation of the Spring Conference 2020 of the DeGEval Working Group on Development Policy and Humanitarian Aid (AK Epol-HuHi) on the topic of monitoring. In the process, literature was sought that deals with standards or quality criteria for monitoring on a higher-level, quasi universally valid level. While such documents exist for evaluation (DeGEval, 2016; OECD, 2010) and for scientific work (DFG, 2019), no comparable paper could be found for monitoring.

After the meeting, a working group of volunteers was formed to look into the question "What is successful monitoring?" and to conduct a literature review. A total of 46 documents from 34 organisations were analysed, most of them internal guidelines on monitoring by the organisations themselves. Eight papers were from six bilateral donors from OECD countries (DFID, USAID), ten from eight multilateral donors (EU, UNDP, ILO), fifteen from eleven associations and individual authors, which originated in the context of association work (VENRO, DeGEval, ALNAP) and thirteen from nine funding or implementing organisations of the Global North (mainly non-governmental organisations such as Bread for the World, CARE, Misereor, World Vision, but also GIZ). No papers from organisations of the Global South were found.

The documents were analysed with regard to concrete questions, whereby the extracted text passages were transferred into an analysis grid. The questions were, among others: which objectives should monitoring fulfil; which quality criteria are defined for monitoring; which prerequisites are necessary to be able to fulfil these quality criteria and goals; do the quality criteria also apply to evaluation or explicitly only to monitoring?

Afterwards, the authors carried out a qualitative content analysis of the text passages based on Mayring 2010²: Inductive categories were formed that summarised the contents of the respective questions. All statements made in the working paper refer to the selected passages of the respective documents, without claiming to have found all relevant passages.

By monitoring, the authors mean "the regular collection of information with the aim of reviewing the progress of the project compared to the planning [...]" (PHINEO, 2015, p. 49). The working paper focuses explicitly on the monitoring of projects. Most of the selected texts do not include organisational analysis or context in their regular monitoring loops. In addition, most of the texts had a clear reference to development cooperation, which may make transferability to other disciplines difficult.

¹ Zeitschrift für Evaluation | 22. Jahrgang | 2023. Heft 1 | S. 351–356 | <https://doi.org/10.31244/zfe.2023.01.11> | © 2023 Waxmann. Authorised translation.

² For an explanation of qualitative content analysis: <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1089/2383> [17.4.2023].

The structure of the working paper is as follows: After the introduction, there is a clarification of terms in chapter 2. Chapter 3 presents the results of the literature review along four central themes (objectives, quality criteria, preconditions, difficulties & trade-offs). Chapter 4 looks at the links between monitoring and evaluation and compares the extent to which the objectives of and the quality criteria for monitoring and evaluation overlap or differ. Chapter 5 critically assesses and supplements the results of the working paper; finally, there is an outlook and a conclusion. The working paper can be downloaded from the DeGEval website.³

Quality criteria for monitoring

In the position paper, the authors show which aspects are important for the respective organisations if monitoring is to be "good" or successful. Based on their analysis of the papers, they developed their own proposal of quality criteria for monitoring. Monitoring is successful when the following quality criteria are observed:

- **Monitoring is participatory (M1):** Monitoring appropriately involves all project stakeholders (especially beneficiaries) in all phases of the process (planning, implementation and evaluation, interpretation and use of monitoring data). Data is collected, where meaningful, not only by the organisation responsible for monitoring, but also by the beneficiaries. This promotes ownership in the organisations carrying out the monitoring and empowerment in the beneficiaries who are the target group of the monitored project.
- **Monitoring is flexible, timely and continuous (M2):** Data collection is continuous and timely so that data is available when it is needed. If changes occur, whether due to the evaluation of previous data collection or other circumstances, the focus, scope, timing and methodology of monitoring are adjusted.
- **Monitoring clearly defines purposes, goals and expected use (M3):** Before the actual monitoring begins, it is determined for which goals and purposes the results of the monitoring will be used and who the intended users are. Monitoring results make it possible to steer the project in a timely manner and to counteract unintended negative effects and possible risks (see M10).
- **Monitoring is based on appropriate indicators (M4):** The indicators are formulated SMART. Data is analysed and reported on a disaggregated basis, e.g. differentiated by gender, poverty, disability depending on the subject matter.
- **Monitoring data is credible and usable (M5):** Data collected are well researched, valid, reliable and understandable. Data are usable for the defined purposes and objectives, collected data include indicators and other information (e.g. geodata, informally obtained information).
- **Monitoring can be steered and implemented (M6):** There are clear responsibilities for monitoring. The time, financial and human resources required are in proportion to the available resources and the project.
- **Monitoring is receptive to criticism and promotes the ability to reflect and learn (M7):** Feedback and criticism from beneficiaries is specifically requested as part of the monitoring process. The results of monitoring are used for dialogue, reflection and learning, not only by the organisation carrying out the monitoring, but also by the beneficiaries and the donor organisation (if there is one for the project).
- **Monitoring strengthens transparency (M8):** Monitoring procedures and data collection methods are documented and disclosed to key stakeholders. The results of monitoring are communicated within the organisation, to the donor and to the beneficiaries.

³ <https://www.degeval.org/arbeitskreise/entwicklungspolitik-und-humanitaere-hilfe/veroeffentlichungen/> [14.06.2023]

- **Monitoring is ethical and fair (M9):** The rights and obligations of those involved in monitoring are clearly regulated. Individual rights and personal data are protected. Strengths and weaknesses of the subject matter are made clear, stakeholders are taken into account in data collection and analysis, and different perspectives are included. Data are evaluated in a balanced way. The ethical basis of monitoring is transparent.
- **Monitoring also captures non-intended results (M10):** Monitoring not only measures the expected results and impacts of the project, but also records non-intended outcomes and identifies possible risks. For this purpose, qualitative methods are also included in the monitoring.

Figure 1: 10 quality criteria



Source: Own representation

Classification

The ten quality criteria for successful monitoring in development cooperation are not to be understood as a checklist that must be implemented equally by all projects. Depending on the organisation, context, project as well as the objectives of the monitoring, different quality criteria are more or less relevant.

In order to implement the quality criteria, preconditions are needed: Successful monitoring requires sufficient human, financial and time resources to provide valid information to steer a project and contribute to learning. Participation needs a commitment at all levels of the organisation (from management to project implementation) and appropriate support from the funding organisation. The organisation's management should explicitly support the implementation of monitoring and work towards a learning culture.

Outlook

With a view to the future design of monitoring, various trends and overarching developments are relevant, four of which are briefly discussed below.

SDGs: Many projects already consider in the planning phase to which Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) they contribute with their goals and to what extent this contribution can be recorded in the monitoring process. If appropriate indicators are formulated and measured, it should be considered to what extent these findings can be included in an overarching and aggregated reporting on the status of the SDGs. The integration of the SDGs should be reflected upon during project planning, discussed with different stakeholders and then decided individually for each project.

Digitalisation: Through digitalisation, there are more possibilities to collect data and have it immediately available for decision-making. In addition, large amounts of data can be analysed in part automatically (keywords: big data, text mining), which requires corresponding capacities and resources. Digital monitoring tools can reach more people in a cost-effective way; however, there is a risk that vulnerable groups are less able to participate via digital tools (e.g. people without access to the internet). The opportunities and challenges of digitalisation should therefore be taken into account in monitoring.

Shrinking spaces: In recent years, the scope of civil society projects in some countries has become smaller, which is summarised under the term "shrinking spaces".⁴ For monitoring, this means that projects increasingly also need to observe the political framework and that they may have to be more careful when setting up and collecting data for their monitoring in order not to endanger anyone. The quality criterion "ethical and fair" is then, for example, more relevant than the quality criterion of transparency. Careful consideration and rapid adaptation of monitoring to a changing context is important here.

Southern perspective: This working paper is based on literature from organisations in the Global North. However, the perspective of the Global South should be included in the discourse. People in the Global South, who predominantly implement monitoring in development cooperation projects, should be strongly involved in how monitoring is designed at the project level and at the higher level.

The question of whether a paradigm shift in monitoring is necessary in development cooperation as a whole that goes beyond the issue of quality criteria was not an explicit subject of the working paper. It might be worthwhile to reflect on this in a further step. Findings from the paper could contribute to the discussion on whether approaches to monitoring should be fundamentally changed.

Literature

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⁴ For shrinking spaces see: <http://blog.venro.org/shrinking-spaces-was-steckt-dahinter-und-wie-koennen-nro-darauf-reagieren/>, retrieved 23.03.2023.

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