DATA BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE:
Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation at The Hunger Project
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About The Hunger Project: The Hunger Project works in 12 countries in Africa, South Asia, and Latin America to end hunger and poverty by pioneering sustainable, grassroots, women-centered strategies and advocating for their widespread adoption in countries throughout the world. Hunger Project programs focus on three essential elements for sustainable development: mobilizing people at the grassroots level to build self-reliance; empowering women as key change agents; and forging partnerships with local government. For more information, visit www.thp.org.

Purpose of This Paper
In the wake of various initiatives such as Principles for Data Development and the post-2015 “Data Revolution,” a number of organizations and practitioners have identified the importance of community-centered and collaborative methods in monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Despite the importance given to the topic, relatively little information is publicly available on practices and methods in the field of participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E). There is a huge lack of (1) formal, documented practices, (2) training prototypes for M&E field teams on the design and delivery of PM&E methods, and (3) space to discuss, debate, and validate successes or failures in PM&E methods among practitioners.

The Hunger Project intends this paper to be a first step in highlighting the need for practitioner exchanges on this PM&E. The Hunger Project offers a short introduction to currently used PM&E methods in Program Countries and the lessons learned along the way. THP expects other organizations have also learned valuable lessons in PM&E, and welcomes other voices and papers to contribute to this discussion. The goal is to begin dialogues on PM&E practices and to advocate for wider adoption of participatory forms of M&E throughout the international development space.

Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation: What and Why?
Monitoring and evaluation are vital components of any organization’s functioning. Monitoring, the process of documenting and verifying program activities and outputs, and evaluation, which assess the results of these activities, are important sources of learning and improvement. Accountability and transparency are other major drivers behind monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring frameworks are established to ensure that program activities are taking place; evaluations are conducted to determine whether funding is being put to good use and the expected results are occurring. However, these processes are typically oriented in one direction: towards holding nonprofit organizations
accountable to donors for the funding they receive, or holding local partners accountable to organizational headquarters. The chain of accountability runs almost exclusively from top to bottom. While this accountability is important for program management purposes, very often, the voices of the communities participating in development interventions are lost in the clamor.

As an organization grounded in grassroots advocacy and international development from the bottom up, The Hunger Project takes a different approach M&E that empowers participants in our programs as both collectors and consumers of data, through participatory monitoring and evaluation methods. The goal of our participatory M&E system is to recognize what works within project implementation, what does not work and why, and create a feedback loop that directly connects our project performance with community expectations and goals.

Traditional approaches to M&E rarely give community members a formal place in accountability structures, or designate a role for them in determining criteria for success, deciding what information is important, or collecting data. Even when evaluations solicit community input through household surveys or focus groups—which require a substantial time investment from community members—the results of these studies are almost never communicated back to the participants.

Participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) is designed to recognize and include communities as important stakeholders in data collection and evaluation. It expands the notion of accountability to answer not only whether organizations are fulfilling the terms of the funding they receive, but also, most importantly, whether they are fulfilling the needs and goals of the communities they serve. PM&E requires including community voices in monitoring and evaluation, and building the capacity of community members to become active partners in this process.

In addition to including community voices, this approach can be a powerful tool for change when put in the hands of communities. The abilities of communities to understand what activities or programs are in progress, determine whether or not they are successful, and make course corrections are critical to the long-term sustainability of locally driven development. These tools can be used to plan and implement communities’ own initiatives, to hold organizations accountable for their activities in the locality, and to hold public authorities responsible for the provision of programs or services.

Relatively little information is currently available on the field of participatory M&E in terms of research, resources, or documentation of what practices organizations are using. This paper is intended to document The Hunger Project’s (THP’s) practices and lessons learned with a wider audience in order to share with and learn from other organizations taking similar approaches, and to encourage a shift towards more participatory forms of M&E in the development community.
Tools and Methods: THP’s Approach to PM&E

The Hunger Project incorporates participatory methods and feedback mechanisms throughout the monitoring and evaluation cycle, and empowers community members to be drivers and consumers of monitoring and evaluation information, rather than merely subjects.

Capacity-building is a core component of all of THP’s programs, from improving health and nutrition to women’s empowerment. The purpose is to improve the skills and knowledge of partner communities so they can become self-reliant in pursuing their development goals; the ability to monitor activities and evaluate achievements and setbacks is crucial to self-reliant development. Participatory M&E is a way of continuing to work towards the goals of the program, even as the program is being evaluated.

Data by the People: Participatory data collection

In many of the countries where The Hunger Project works, volunteer community members are selected to be “M&E Animators” or “Participatory Action Research Animators” who are responsible for some data collection on activities in their locality. Animators attend a series of training sessions that cover issues like roles and responsibilities, monitoring and evaluation tools, reporting requirements, and participatory action research. These animators are the link between community members and THP—they are the mechanism for the feedback loop of information running from communities to THP, and back from THP to the communities.

What is an Animator?
Animators are locally-based volunteers that have been recruited as a result of their commitment and motivation to become community leaders and advocates. Animators work at the grassroots level to tackle issues such as health, nutrition, sanitation and education, as well as serving as vital conduits for accurate information.

Primary data on program outputs is often collected by animators. For example, they may collect information on the number of women’s empowerment training sessions held and the number of attendees; how much grain is stored in the food bank; and how many children are enrolled in the program’s nursery school. They may also monitor overall project implementation and progress, such as which community members are contributing to a construction project and what services they are providing. This information is then communicated to THP staff on a monthly or quarterly basis.

Unique tools for PM&E: Mexico

As well as collecting data on program and activity outputs, some countries have taken additional innovative approaches. In Mexico, for example, at a workshop held in Chiapas, young indigenous women drew pictures to represent the human rights they are entitled to. This was done at the beginning and end of the workshop, and was a way to evaluate the results.
In some countries, community animators are also involved in evaluations, including outcome surveys aiming to measure not only program progress, but also the results of THP’s activities. Animators may participate in a variety of ways depending on the purpose and design of the evaluation. In Malawi, for example, M&E animators played an important part in planning for outcome evaluations. M&E animators led the sampling process, first randomly selecting the villages that would be included, and then creating comprehensive household lists from which a random sample of households would be surveyed to assess the results of THP’s programs in their community. Animators may also accompany the outside enumerators administering surveys, and the presence of a familiar face can help community members feel more comfortable during the survey process. In other cases, animators have been trained to conduct primary data collection.

Data collection on MDGs: Ghana
In 2012, THP-Ghana conducted a study to document how its communities were performing on key indicators related to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Data was collected through household surveys and focus group discussions, conducted by selected M&E animators trained to use these tools. Animators conducted a total of 650 household surveys in 149 communities across the country.

There were advantages and challenges to using this approach. Animators, as community members themselves, experience no language or cultural barriers during data collection, and already know most of the respondents. However, this knowledge can risk introducing personal bias into the data collection process. The limited literacy and numeracy of many animators was another difficulty. This process was an important learning opportunity for community animators and for the Ghana team that will inform and improve the techniques used in future studies.

Training animators for baseline data collection: Mexico
In San Luis Potosí, Mexico, community animators (or “catalysts”) collected baseline data in their community, which will be used to define their goals and assess progress over time.

Before collecting data, animators attend a workshop to train them for this task. THP facilitators begin this session by drawing an open-ended timeline, and asking participants to document the most important activities and events experienced in the community – these could be natural disasters, visits from an important person, a community event, etc. Participants are then asked to place access to basic services, such as electricity and health centers, on the timeline, and identify the gaps in basic services that still exist – perhaps poor sanitation systems, for example. The facilitator chooses one of these gaps, and asks participants for more details about it – how many sanitary latrines are there in the village, and how many more are needed? No one can answer these questions with certainty. How can this problem be resolved without accurate information about it?

This process is used to highlight the power of knowledge and the importance of data collection for community development. With an understanding of the importance of the work they will carry out, participants are then trained specifically in the implementation of the survey tool, including extensive time to practice with each other.
Closing the Loop: Bringing data back to communities

Involving communities in data collection is only one half of the participatory monitoring and evaluation cycle. It is also critical to bring information back to the communities. Participants need to see the results and benefits of the participatory M&E process and the progress of program interventions to avoid it being viewed as an externally imposed demand on their time.

M&E data is brought back to communities at several stages. In Ghana, Malawi, Benin, Senegal, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Uganda and Ethiopia, communities hold meetings one to four times per year where M&E Animators report to their communities on activities over the previous three months. “General assemblies” are also held every year in program communities. These meetings are open to all community members and during these sessions, M&E Animators report on the year’s progress against the goals they set for themselves at the beginning of the year. Participants use this information to discuss and assess the year’s performance, and set targets for the upcoming year.

Participatory Tools: Transparency Boards

In THP’s communities in Africa, there is no need for community members to wait for meetings to find out what is going on. Each community has created a “Transparency Board” on a central building, where information on the planning, performance, and financial status of activities are permanently posted. This is a powerful tool for accountability, empowering community members to follow up with leaders any time regarding their concerns and allowing them to arrive at quarterly and annual meetings already armed with information.
Participatory Tools: Spider Web Assessments

One of the most accessible participatory assessment tools uses a spider web diagram, and can be implemented even by facilitators with limited literacy and numeracy. It shows the gaps between ideal and actual performance on a selection of indicators.

To introduce this session, the facilitator draws a spider web on a flip chart, if available, or on the ground in the dirt if not. The facilitator begins the session by asking participants why a spider builds a web this way, concluding that the spider builds what it needs to live well and feed itself. What does the community need to live well and feed itself? Relevant indicators are listed around the outside of the web. Each level of the web is numbered, with 0 at the center and 10 on the outer ring. Participants then discuss each indicator, and agree on a score for their community based on particular criteria; this score is placed on the web. Each score is then connected to form a diagram like the one below. The facilitator asks whether a spider would be able to live and eat with a web such as this one; the answer is no. The session concludes with the formulation of a plan for action to build out the weak parts of the web.
Community Data Presentations: Malawi

In 2012, a pilot outcome evaluation was conducted in five program communities in Malawi, using focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and surveys administered to a random sample of households. Once data collection and analysis were complete, Community Data Presentations were held in each of the communities to inform participants about the results and provide space for discussion and feedback.

How do these meetings work? First, a THP staff member presents key results from the outcome evaluation. A major challenge is the limited literacy and numeracy of community members; so, flip charts are used extensively to provide visual explanations and make findings digestible. An important component of this presentation is providing the community's results in a national, regional, or local context rather than in isolation. The bulk of the meeting time is devoted to community discussions of the results in each thematic area (such as literacy and education, food security, and women’s empowerment); allocating sufficient time to this component is critical to the success of these meetings. When results are deemed unsatisfactory by participants, these discussions result in a plan for action to improve performance in the next cycle.

Community data presentations enhance community understanding of and commitment to program activities, foster greater demand for results and accountability, and, most importantly, empower communities to see – and change – where they stand on the goals they have set out for themselves. They also allow THP to hear and act upon important community feedback. For example, enrollment in adult literacy classes was decreasing in some communities. Participants explained that the location of the class was inconvenient for many households; THP Malawi moved the class in response.

Lessons, Challenges, and Solutions

Participatory monitoring and evaluation is not without challenges. Some of the challenges we have faced and lessons we have learned include:

Tension between participation and standardization: Participatory M&E requires organizations to walk a delicate line between community participation in data collection and consumption, and the rigor and standardization required to operate a large organization with reporting responsibilities. Compromises can be struck to meet dual goals of comparability and local contextualization. For example, THP’s outcome evaluation indicators are developed at the global and national organizational levels to provide comparability across program countries, and there is value to this standardization, though it limits community participation in this component of the process. Additionally, while surveys are largely standardized across eight sub-Saharan African program countries, local offices may adjust how questions are asked to match the local context.
**Purpose informs practice:** The purpose of a particular evaluation should inform the techniques used to implement it. Rigorous impact studies aiming to investigate causality are probably best conducted by professional researchers, but for evaluations geared towards accountability and learning, participatory methods are very appropriate. At THP evaluations, whose primary purpose is to assess operations and outputs are highly participatory, and serve the organization well in assessing its operations outcome evaluations, which aim to assess complex changes and impacts and must put more weight on methodological rigor, are commonly administered by trained enumerators recruited from local universities. Indeed, this issue mirrors that commonly experienced by organizations determining whether to have internal or external experts implement an evaluation – while internal staff have a strong understanding of the program and existing relationships with respondents, they also have a vested interest in the outcome of the evaluations, and may not be well suited to conduct every study.

**Volunteer motivation:** Maintaining M&E animators’ motivation for data collection can be difficult. All animators are volunteers, with many other demands on their time; fulfilling their M&E responsibilities takes them away from their usual tasks. Some ways to keep them engaged include:

- **Reasonable requirements:** Ensuring that the tasks and responsibilities required of each animator are not overly burdensome can help reduce attrition.

- **Relevant data:** Developing indicators that animators have a genuine interest in and perceive as valuable is critical.

- **Highlighting benefits:** During training, facilitators should discuss and highlight the benefits that animators may experience, including contribution to their communities, increased social capital, and the opportunity to build skills that may be applicable when other organizations arrive to work in the community.

- **Material incentives:** This is the most obvious approach, but one that THP does not use because of resource constraints and concerns that this approach may not be sustainable for communities over the long term, once THP is no longer involved.

- **Refresher trainings and certificates:** Providing animators with regular capacity-building, as well as certificates that they can use when job-hunting, for example, can be a useful motivator.

- **Access to additional training:** Providing animators with skills training beyond M&E, particularly related to their livelihoods, can incentivize animator commitment and contribute to their overall development.

**Volunteer literacy and numeracy:** While animators are required to have at least a basic level of education, their literacy and numeracy levels are often not advanced. Additionally, in some communities, the most educated members are those most likely to
leave the community in pursuit of economic opportunities, contributing to high rates of animator attrition. In Ghana, for example, teachers were initially targeted for recruitment as M&E animators because of their high level of education and engagement; however, they left communities at such high rates that the recruitment strategy was changed.

- **Functional adult literacy training**: If possible, providing adult literacy classes in communities can mitigate this challenge by improving literacy and numeracy skills in the community. In Senegal, the implementation of a functional adult literacy program has expanded the pool of potential animators.

- **Appropriate tools**: Developing and using tools that are straightforward and easy to use by people with limited literacy and numeracy makes low education less of a constraint, and can improve data quality at the same time.

Community literacy and numeracy: Because many community members cannot read, and even if they are literate they may be generally unfamiliar with interpreting data, a variety of visual aids are used to communicate information to them. In Ghana, for example, quarterly progress is shown against goals in graphs like the “Epicenter Quarterly Performance/Score Tracking” graph below. This provides a straightforward visual representation of the gaps between anticipated and actual performance and a jumping-off point for discussions.

**Time-Sensitive Feedback**: Data entry, cleaning, and analysis can be time-intensive tasks. Depending on the workload burden, finalizing survey results can take several
months to complete. Delays in finalizing and disseminating results can cause community members to lose motivation and interest in participating in the process. Utilizing mobile data collection to improve quality and accuracy of information has been a tremendously helpful technique to shorten the time gap between collection and dissemination.

**Participation of women and marginalized groups.** As women tend to be the least educated, poorest, and most vulnerable in community projects, engaging women is critical to the PM&E process. Unfortunately, many social norms and structures bar women and marginalized groups from actively participating in community meetings. In recognition of this challenge, meetings should be designed to counterbalance this effect; examples of improved meeting design include holding special meetings with certain groups or specifically reaching out to marginalized households to participate in community feedback sessions.

**Data quality:** The issues of community member motivation and literacy are tightly linked with data quality. Using community members with a few days of training as opposed to highly trained experts for data collection inevitably entails tradeoffs. Here again, the purpose of the data should inform the techniques used to collect it. In addition, data quality can be substantially improved by strengthening community members' commitment to their work, and ensuring that the tools they use are readily understandable and user-friendly.

**Critical Inputs for Participatory M&E**
In order for participatory M&E methods to work, some minimum conditions must be in place within the implementing organization.

**Strong organizational support.** There must be strong buy-in from the organization at the global and local levels in order to adopt these techniques. Change is always a challenge, and without real commitment to participatory M&E at all levels, implementation will be near-impossible.

**Willingness to listen.** When undertaking participatory M&E, there must be a true willingness on the part of the organization to listen to the feedback provided and take it into account. A cardinal rule of participatory M&E, as in any area of life, is “don’t ask if you’re not willing to listen.” Without space within programs and accountability structures that can adjust for community feedback, the time invested by communities and staff in participation is largely wasted.

**Awareness-raising.** Raising awareness about participatory M&E approaches among development agencies and donor organizations will increase appreciation of their value and provide space for investment in these approaches and in local M&E capacity-building.
Scalable Approaches

While the particular PM&E tools adopted by different organizations will necessarily be informed by their contexts and activities, below are some suggestions for those wishing to expand into this area.

• *Transparency boards:* As described earlier, “transparency boards” where data from monitoring activities is regularly posted for public review are a low-cost way to empower communities as consumers of data.

• *Participatory evaluation tools:* Using tools like spider web assessments to supplement traditional monitoring and evaluation techniques can increase community ownership over interventions, build their capacity to monitor and guide their own development, and provide useful feedback to organizations aiming to improve their programs.

• *Regular community meetings:* Regular meetings where quarterly or biannual data are presented to the community for review and discussion give organizations and community members an understanding of and control over the direction and progress of an intervention.

• *Post-survey presentations:* When communities are surveyed for evaluations, presenting the results of this evaluation to them for their reflection and feedback is a minimum exchange for their investment in the process, and can provide important insights into the interpretation and explanation of findings.

For more information on The Hunger Project’s Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation program, contact Megan Colnar at megan.colnar@thp.org.
About The Hunger Project
The Hunger Project is a global, non-profit strategic organization whose mission is to end hunger and poverty by pioneering sustainable, grassroots, women-centered strategies and advocating for their widespread adoption in countries throughout the world.

The Hunger Project is active in Australia, Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina Faso, Canada, Germany, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Japan, Malawi, Mexico, Mozambique, Netherlands, New Zealand, Peru, Senegal, Sweden, Switzerland, Uganda, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The Global Hunger Project is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization in the United States.