

Through the Eyes of The Implementers: Practical Guidelines to Support Community Projects Through Monitoring and Evaluation in Rural Areas

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Abstract

One of the challenges facing many governments today, including the South African government, is eradicating poverty and putting Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems in place to support poverty alleviation initiatives. Many poverty alleviation projects under social workers' supervision seem unsustainable even though M&E is performed continuously. This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of mechanisms applied by social workers to support poverty alleviation projects and to propose the criteria and guidelines for consideration when supporting these projects. This study employed the phenomenological research design with descriptive, exploratory, and contextual research constructs. Purposive sampling was used to select participants, and data was collected using a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions in face-to-face interviews. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent were followed. This study established that there is a need for participant training on M&E to improve sustainability and accountability. Also, there are no clear standards to guide M&E activities. There is a need for a robust M&E system that should be able to answer the evaluation questions, promote learning, and satisfy accountability needs without being rigidly inflexible. The paper concluded that a lack of structured M&E activities and functioning impact results in poor implementation. Therefore, attention should be paid to when, how, and who should be involved in monitoring and evaluation. The study proffered guidelines for consideration by social service professionals and practice-based initiatives to improve M&E activities initiatives to support projects.

Keywords: Community projects; evaluation, monitoring; poverty alleviation; social workers.

INTRODUCTION

Limpopo province is one of the poorest provinces in South Africa. According to Statistics, the poverty line and the distribution of the country's wealth are highly unequal. Further, the province's economy is based on the export of primary products such as fruits, vegetables, maize meal, and cotton (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Limpopo has a population of about 5.5 million; 90% of its residents live in rural areas, with 60% living in poverty. Given its avowed mission to eradicate poverty, this poses a challenge to the developmental social welfare system (Lehohla, 2016). The South African government remains committed to improving the quality of life for South Africans through poverty alleviation project initiatives, especially in rural communities. While rural development remains on the country's agenda, accessing government funding for community

development projects is a hurdle, particularly for rural dwellers because of the required detailed business plan (Patrick, Bendiane, Kruger, Harris, Riddin, Trehard, Bornman, and Gaudart, 2023). The Limpopo province represents about 13% of South Africa's total population and has the highest population growth rate in the country, which peaked at 3.9% per annum (Lehohla, 2016). Limpopo's socio-economic development is poor when compared to other provinces. To counteract the abject poverty in the province, the Waterberg District Department of Social Development has initiated several community projects, including sewing, bakery, poultry farming, brickyards, and stone crushing, to address poverty and promote sustainable development. Considering these initiatives, it can be presumed that M&E is important in sustaining these projects and ensuring they realize their objectives (Naidoo, 2011). Through its social workers, the provincial Department of Social Development (DSD) in Limpopo ensures that poverty alleviation projects are supported, monitored, and evaluated. This study was motivated by the many community projects that do not function sustainably under the guidance of social workers employed by the DSD. Therefore, the study aims to understand the M&E mechanisms implemented to support community projects.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMUNITY, PROBLEMS AND TARGET SOLUTIONS

General description

One of the biggest problems with M&E in South Africa is the poor quality of government planning. Poor planning has affected how the results of these policies, projects, and programs are tracked and evaluated, and they sometimes lack clearly stated targeted outcomes (Kinzer, 2016). To put it succinctly, several factors hinder South Africa's capacity to successfully implement policy objectives, including a lack of political will, poor leadership, managerial flaws, improper institutional architecture, and a deficiency of an effective institutional culture (Ramaano, 2021).

The lack of thorough planning and coordination of the M&E process is a problem for the public sector, especially the several provincial Departments of Social Development, since it fails to provide sufficient information for planning, policymaking, and budgetary purposes (Wyngaard, 2013). The difficulties that this study addresses are standard in situations where social workers perform the M&E procedure to ensure compliance. The field of social development involves sharing accountability for monitoring and assessment. While provincial departments and non-profit organizations are in charge of implementing social development services and overseeing them at the implementation level, the National Department of Social Development is in charge of formulating policies and conducting strategic monitoring and evaluation (Aston, Roche, Schaaf, and Cant, 2022).

Social workers from the province Department of Social Development in Limpopo carry out monitoring procedures every three months to assist and strengthen initiatives to reduce poverty. Social workers oversee and assess how well the project is operating overall, how the NPO uses government-donated funds, how closely they adhere to the sustainability plan, and what project goals need funding as part of these procedures. Social workers face several obstacles during the monitoring and evaluation processes, such as a lack of resources, inadequate training, and non-standard monitoring and evaluation systems. These deficiencies mean that government M&E

initiatives lack the depth required to enhance the functioning of these projects (Guyadeen & Seasons, 2016).

Performance monitoring is a crucial "early warning system of things going wrong within the project," according to Keeton (2012:23). Podems, Goldman, and Jacobs (2014) claim that community projects aimed at reducing poverty are not sustainable because they lack technical expertise, monitoring, and evaluation capabilities.

Horta (2006) and Feitelson, Felsenstein, Razin, and Stern (2017) note that funding community projects is driven by political and developmental goals, often in conflict and an afterthought in the M&E process. This negatively impacts the functioning and sustainability of poverty-alleviating projects. Funding departments frequently use donor funding as an aid to garner support and influence within the communities. An organizational analysis of funding agencies from Tendler's (1975) classic analysis established that an economic analysis of projects often justifies decisions that have already been made rather than being in support of the ongoing allocation of resources. Development agency personnel are incentivized to 'move money' to fulfill spending targets or develop so-called 'project approval culture,' which ultimately undermines the quality of project designs (Clements, Chianca & Sisaki, 2008). This implies that government departments spend money to attain political targets and ignore evaluations that determine the feasibility of funded projects and ensure the viability of their business plans.

Furthermore, international development aid directed at projects is ineffective in alleviating social ills, diseases, and poverty (Clements *et al.*, 2008); Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 2016); scholars argue that aid-related challenges are due to substantively flawed M&E mechanisms, the incentive structure in aid management, and failures in accountability. Shaffer (2012) notes that implementing M&E in community projects is often conducted in one form or another within the public sector or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), though it is often done poorly. The role of monitoring projects is to perform an oversight and empowerment role, where stakeholders are collaboratively involved to benefit the project.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study was two-fold: it aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of social workers' perspectives regarding the suitability and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms implemented to support poverty alleviation projects; secondly, it aimed to suggest guidelines that would make these projects sustainable. In pursuit of these aims, the following objectives were formulated:

- Develop an in-depth understanding of the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms implemented to support poverty alleviation projects.
- Generate criteria to consider when funding and monitoring poverty alleviation projects.

METHOD

The study employed a qualitative methodology coupled with an exploratory, descriptive, and contextual research strategy of inquiry. Face-to-face interviews were conducted through a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions, which were then used to collect data. Twelve social workers were selected to participate in this study. Tesch's eight steps of qualitative data analysis were applied (Creswell, 2014). The population for this study consisted of social

workers employed by the Limpopo Provincial Department of Social Development (DSD) for more than three years who have some experience in monitoring and evaluating projects. The study was conducted in the Waterberg District of Limpopo within five municipalities: Modimolle, Thabazimbi, Mogalakwena, Mookgophong, and Lephalale. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling and the inclusion criterion. A phenomenological research design and an exploratory, descriptive, and contextual inquiry strategy were employed. This strategy allowed the researcher to study and gain insight into the perspectives of social workers concerning the M&E mechanisms applied for the support of poverty alleviation projects (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Thomas, 2017; Stake, 2005; Yegidis, Weinbach & Myers, 2018). Moreover, this strategy was necessitated because the topic has been understudied in South Africa (Babbie, 2013; Creswell, 2016; Thomas, 2017; Yegidis *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the researcher conducted contextual (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011) and exploratory studies to find answers to the study's objectives (Yegidis *et al.*, 2018).

The study is based on evaluation theory. Generally, evaluation theory consists of activities that judge the worth of a programme (Kimatu, 2020). The evaluation assesses the worth of a program (Farrell, Kratzmann, McWilliam, Robinson, Saunders, Ticknor & White, 2002). It relates to research questions and methods for reviewing processes, activities, and strategies to improve them. This evaluation theory enabled the researcher to assess the strengths and weaknesses of M&E within the DSD from the perspectives of its social workers. A thematic content analysis allowed the researcher to read through each transcript and clarify the general import of the interviews and transcripts, noting ideas as they emerged from the transcripts. The researcher became familiar with the data through this iterative interaction (Mathews & Ross, 2010). The data analysis process was complex, with myriad back-and-forth movements and listening to the audio recordings. After the transcriptions, the researcher reviewed each transcript to ensure accuracy. Transcribing did not simply entail writing down what the participants said; it involved making analytic judgments on what to include in the findings and the best way of representing the participants' experiences (Gibson & Brown, 2009). The researcher listed all the topics and clustered similar topics together. Based on the list of topics, the researcher returned to the original data and coded appropriate text segments, then established the most descriptive wording for topics and categorized them into themes and sub-themes.

By being cognizant of the moral obligations to conduct research ethically and treating the research participants with integrity, dignity, and respect (Punch, 2016; Thomas, 2017), the researcher adhered to research ethical principles by obtaining the participants' informed consent, creating anonymous identities, undertaking the confidential management of information, and debriefing at the participants' request. Furthermore, written permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Limpopo Department of Social Development. Every participant provided their written consent before participating in the study. Instead of saving and discussing data using participant details such as names and surnames, pseudonyms denote their information and contributions. Ethical clearance was obtained from the UNISA Department of Social Work Ethics Review Committee (Ref#: R&EC:01/02/18/42178711-19).

The demographic profiles of the research participants

Twelve participants constituted the sample for this study, and all met the criteria for the study. Participants were recruited from the Department of Social Development (DSD) offices in the Waterberg district of the Limpopo Province in South Africa. These participants have experience in monitoring and evaluating community projects and can provide access to their wealth of experience. Table 1 provides a profile overview of the study's participants. The biographical profiles of the participants are presented in Table 1. To ensure anonymity, numbers were assigned to participants as indicated below.

Table 1: Profile of participants

Participant	Occupation	Gender	Years of M&E experience
1	Social worker	Male	17
2	Social worker	Female	14
3	Social worker	Female	11
4	Social worker	Male	4
5	Social worker	Female	7
6	Social worker	Male	5
7	Social worker	Female	10
8	Social worker	Female	8
9	Social worker	Male	8
10	Social worker	Male	5
11	Social worker	Female	4
12	Social worker	Male	5

Presentation of themes, subthemes, and literature control

Table 2 presents an overview of the themes and their related sub-themes derived from the interviews. The interviews were conducted in-depth and individually. The information from the participants was thematically analyzed. Direct quotations from participant responses are provided to buttress and substantiate the themes and related sub-themes. Literature extracts and related ideas were added to confirm, contrast, and elaborate on participant responses, and comments on themes or sub-themes were generated.

Table 2: Themes and subthemes

THEME	SUB-THEME
Design and implementation of monitoring and evaluation systems.	❖ Implementation of M&E in the DSD ❖ M&E is regarded as a policing exercise rather than a developmental exercise

THEME	SUB-THEME
Proposed areas to monitor and evaluate before the initiation, funding and supporting of community poverty alleviation projects.	❖ Assessment of the type and viability of community project ❖ Diversity in the recruitment of project members ❖ Knowledge and qualifications of project members ❖ Governing structures
Social workers' suggestions on what could be done to improve the monitoring, evaluation, and sustainability of poverty alleviation projects	❖ Coherent sustainability plan ❖ Flexible and standardized monitoring and evaluation tools ❖ Multidisciplinary approach to monitoring and evaluation ❖ Introducing specialized focus areas to support monitoring and evaluation activities. ❖ Structured monitoring and evaluation unit ❖ Resource allocation

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Theme 1: Design and implementation of monitoring and evaluation systems

Properly designing and implementing monitoring and evaluation systems is instrumental in ensuring the success and sustainability of poverty alleviation projects.

Sub-theme 1: Implementation of M&E in the DSD

How M&E is construed influences how it is conducted. According to Ile, Eresia-Eke, and Allen-Ile (2012), the success of a program is determined by its preparation and conceptualization. To assess the conceptualization of M&E within the DSD, participants were asked to describe their understanding of M&E within the context of the department. Vignettes from some of the responses are given in the subsequent quotations:

Participant 12 described M&E as follows:

"Monitoring and evaluation is really about checking if people's behaviour has changed. It should also be used to determine how effectively our program is being implemented. It should tell us where we need to change or improve things. It should tell us what we are doing right, too. So, I suppose, overall, M&E should indicate where we are as an organization. However, in our case, [it] is more about chasing targets and numbers, not about quality per se."

This response acknowledges that M&E is conducted to check programme performance. Patton (2008) provides a rationale for conducting M&E to ensure that programs and projects are on track to achieving the desired results and that program activities comply with the objectives and implementation plan. This means that monitoring should show whether there is alignment and a relationship between the activities being conducted and the policy objectives.

Participant 06 distinguishes M&E within the organisation and the stages at which it is conducted: *"The monitoring side of it is more regular on some of the project aspects, and then the evaluation would come at the end of the project or at least after some time. It will not be done like every month; it can come every few years."*

This statement consolidates what Ile, Eresia-Eke, and Allen-Ile (2012) argued, in that for an M&E system to be effective, the responsibilities of the various role-players at different levels of the organization must be clearly defined, and each person must understand what they ought to do. To assess the clarity of the duties assigned to various role-players, the respondents were also asked to describe how or in which ways they were involved in M&E within the DSD.

Sub-theme 2: M&E is considered a policing rather than a developmental exercise.

The study established that M&E is regarded as a form of policing that searches for mistakes in project implementation. Participants responded that M&E is often viewed as a surveillance tool used to search for errors, thereby attaching negative connotations to the practice.

Participant 12 said:

"We particularly monitor to check if people are using the funds they received effectively and efficiently. Because we have limited time, we are unable to give project members comprehensive feedback with deadlines for implementation."

This submission is in contrast to that of (Aston, Roche, Schaaf, and Cant, 2022), who contend that monitoring should be developmental as opposed to being an exercise for checking and noting what is going wrong within the project to threatening project members with closure if they do not comply. For monitoring to be regarded as developmental, evaluators should identify gaps within the project and develop interventions and strategies alongside comprehensive feedback. When a follow-up question was posed to **Participant 8** on how they assisted projects that do not comply with their standards, the participant responded:

"Mostly when we monitor and notice that the project is not complying or misusing funds, we terminate funding."

This view resonates with the sociologist Foucault (2008), who saw power as a concept practiced subtly and applied in any institution to bring about order. Foucault (2008) argues that power can be exercised to maintain social order through surveillance and observation. Thus, his concept of 'policing' epitomizes how good behavior can be maintained by making people believe that they are under constant surveillance, thus compelling them to behave accordingly Foucault (2008). Foucault (2008) believed this concept would work best in any institution where people were made to believe that they are under constant observation, producing quality work or good behavior because there is no room to relax. This concept is clearly articulated by the study's participants, who perceive monitoring and evaluation within the DSD as not being meant to bring about change to the projects but rather as a tool used to police and enforce certain behaviors through fear, as opposed to a developmental tool.

From the responses, it is evident that M&E is regarded as a policing tool required by management to identify all the areas of lack and incompetence during project processes. Perhaps this is why some managers are "concerned with quantity rather than quality," as highlighted by Participant 12, as it infers that there is always pressure to appear competent. To support this finding, research confirms that learning from M&E results has often been negatively viewed because project managers perceive M&E as a process largely meant to find errors and inefficiencies within project implementation (Bamberger *et al.*, 2012; International NGO Training and Research Centre, 2014). However, it is also necessary for the DSD to investigate project processes occasionally to make a more informed decision and determine whether they are willing to take the risk of continuous funding towards the given project (Pinson, 2004). There is a discrepancy between the DSD and organizational interests within project implementation according to agency theory (Ferris & Graddy, 2014). Therefore, it could be argued that there is no unison of interests between the DSD and their beneficiaries or project members because the department pursues the political agenda of alleviating poverty and creating sustainable communities. In contrast, project members look for instant solutions for poverty relief.

Theme 2: Proposed areas to monitor and evaluate before initiation, funding, and supporting community poverty alleviation projects.

The aspects below are linked to the second objective, which proposes criteria to consider when funding and monitoring poverty alleviation projects. This, in turn, will serve as a consideration when monitoring, supporting, and evaluating community poverty alleviation projects.

Sub-theme 1: Assessment of the type and viability of community project

Social service professionals need to assess the efficacy and viability of projects proposed by community members. The evaluation must establish the reasons behind the proposed idea and evaluate the community members' skills. This evaluation establishes the community members' capacity concerning the proposed project. Participants responded that it is important for the DSD to ensure that evaluation is conducted early to ensure that the proposed community projects are viable and in tandem with what the market may require.

Regarding this, **Participant 01** responded:

"And the market issue, because when we discuss implementing the community project, it is not just a project. At the end of the day, you need to see them develop to become businesses... independent businesses. You ...also want them to assist in employment creation. The idea and the kind of proposed project must be thoroughly assessed to check if project members [can] find a market in their community before funding.

This view finds resonance with Ile *et al.* (2012), who emphasize that it is important for management, leadership structures, and evaluators to focus on pre-implementation evaluation. This implies that social workers should rigorously assess the proposed idea's efficacy and confirm the availability of skilled people and resources for the project that needs to be initiated. This process is proactive in nature and limits blunders that may arise. It also ensures the feasibility, workability, sustainability, and project plan approval by stakeholders and community members.

Sub-theme 2: Diversity in the recruitment of project members

Social workers should evaluate the applications of prospective community project members. During these assessment processes, social workers should consider age, skills, and capabilities

when recruiting community members to participate in community projects. Further, special consideration should be given to the diversity of community members with an emphasis on generational mix. This aspect is important because the younger generation can learn from the older generation, and the older generation can benefit from the youth, who are generally more educated and could be better equipped to handle the administration processes of the projects and implement the recommendations suggested by M&E officers. This diversity enables project succession; when the older members retire, the younger members are bound to continue with the project (Walker, 2014). Participants established that, in most cases, older people are recruited into poverty alleviation initiatives without assessing their readiness, skills, and capabilities. Most of them are illiterate, making it difficult for social workers to empower them during capacity-building sessions.

Participants further emphasized the need for the Department of Social Development to conduct a needs analysis and screen prospective project members to determine their skills and ability to do the work rather than just accommodating applicants based on their economic status. This hurts the M&E process and the project's sustainability. The researcher posits that there should be a balance when recruiting members to ensure that the unskilled learn from those skilled, preventing the recruiting process from being labeled as classists.

This view was best described by **Participant 09**, who said:

"The challenge is that the training is not done in detail, and [it is] not done before. So, we are going to use a trial-and-error method. So, there is no guarantee that these people will do the right thing because most are uneducated, and some do not even understand these things. They just got into it because they saw other people doing it."

The notion that beneficiaries do not understand M&E concepts and processes means that project managers lack awareness, and insufficient knowledge is given to beneficiaries before participating in the development process. Awareness is critical for empowerment and involvement because it enables all beneficiaries to participate more meaningfully as their comprehension needs are accommodated (Kumi, Yeboah, & Kumi, 2020).

Sub-theme 3: Knowledge and qualifications of project members

Even though the primary objective of establishing community projects is to alleviate poverty, especially among vulnerable groups, many people do not have formal qualifications in rural areas. Therefore, social workers must use a balanced approach to evaluate project proposals to ensure members have sufficient skills and knowledge to run successful projects. This will make it easier for social workers to empower project members, especially during feedback sessions after monitoring and evaluation processes. Monitoring and evaluation should not only be employed during the implementation of a project but also during the pre-project phase, where an emphasis is placed on the recruitment and selection of project members, such that there is a significant proportion of members who have formal qualifications, especially the youth, who can be recruited to assist in running the project. The presence of flexible, qualified, and energetic youths can likely bring stability to these community projects, which may result in sufficient profits to enable project members to earn a stipend. Furthermore, the Department of Social Development should also consider placing at least one of its personnel with adequate project management skills and knowledge or a social auxiliary worker on the project, permanently to supervise and guide the

projects. Additionally, social workers must revisit their primary roles of teaching and empowering the elderly within these projects and linking them with relevant resources such as adult learning centers. Organizations are only as strong as their human resource capabilities. An organization without the right people and training is as good as dead (Akingbola, 2012). Participants felt that most project members do not have sufficient skills to run their projects; they advocate for the DSD as the project funder to ensure that qualified personnel are employed to oversee implementation at the project site level. **Participant 02** said:

"One of the challenges we must deal with, other than monitoring, is the high number of illiterate people in community projects. This is because the department forces us to recruit poor people from the communities without evaluating whether they have the skills. In my opinion, the department should assess the ideas then at least mix the illiterate elderly with the youths who can read and write"

Sub-theme 4: Governing structures

All poverty alleviation community projects registered with the Department of Social Development as non-profit organizations must have a board of members, mainly selected from the community. The responsibility of board members is to guide the organization's strategic plan and activities to fulfill its mission. The board is also responsible for assessing the needs of the organization's target market, envisioning the organization's role within the community it serves, and planning the service route. Considering the critical role that board members play within a project, it is important for social service professionals to fully monitor the process of electing board members who govern the project as outlined in the NPO Act, 71 of 1997 (Department of Social Development, 1997). Furthermore, their skills, capacity, diversity, and ability to guide the project must be emphasized. Although projects are run independently through the support of the department, clear, standardized guidelines must be devised, which emphasize qualifications or extensive experience in project management as a pre-requisite for board membership. Participants highlighted that some projects had no active board members and no evidence of minutes, member support, or guidance for project members. Moreover, some of the board members were not community members as guided by the NPO Act (Department of Social Development, 1997), and this has contributed to the poor functioning of many projects.

"The lack of understanding from the community, let me say from the board of directors, about M&E is a problem because most of them lack formal education, which [makes it] difficult for them to even guide the programme. Instead, they become part of the problem." **Participant 05**

Theme 3: Social workers' suggestions on improving the monitoring, evaluation, and sustainability of poverty alleviation projects.

Sub-theme 1: Coherent sustainability plan

For donors and NGOs, project sustainability implies continuing project activities and sustaining project outcomes after the initial grant expires. Most donors are concerned about the sustainability of a project and often fund projects with a well-defined sustainability plan in place. It is challenging for NGOs to ensure the steady flow of funds needed to execute their projects and programmes. Integrating sustainability principles in their ongoing projects could be an effective way to ensure long-term impact. From an NGO's point of view, sustainability means continuing to perform and deliver project benefits to the primary target group after donor funding is

terminated. In other words, sustainability means maintaining developmental efforts after funding is terminated. Participants noted that projects are funded even without a practical or implementable sustainability plan. The department usually overlooks this shortfall because it prioritizes spending the allocated budget and reaching its targets. Monitoring processes should also include holistic assessments of the organization's sustainability plan and develop mechanisms to implement the plan. As such, assessments must be aligned with the project's technical issues. In line with the above, **Participant 09** responded:

"The system that we have for monitoring these projects in the department is very poor. It is not moving at the ideal pace that is required because ...ehh ...we don't see much change in these projects. Most projects have sustainable plans, but they are not even implemented because it is very difficult. Therefore, the M&E processes within the department are very poor."

When monitoring community projects, social workers need to assess their sustainability strictly. The assessment should consider the practicality of the drafted sustainability plan. It should look at the capacity and skills of the project members in tandem with the proposed sustainability plan. A sustainability plan must be implemented simultaneously with the funding provided to assess the project's efficacy and efficiency. Guidance should be provided to project members when they develop project plans to ensure that these plans are realistic, time-bound, and have achievable principles (Mijnarends, Pham, Swaans, van Brakel & Wright, 2011).

One must understand that sustainability requires long-term planning to facilitate diverse donor engagement and improve the institutional capacity of the target population. Sustainability planning is important for non-profit organizations because it prepares them to deliver a positive outcome without primary funding.

There are different aspects of sustainability that social workers must emphasize during the assessment of an organization's sustainability plan. According to Mijnarends *et al.* (2011), the plan entails the following:

- ❖ **Financial sustainability** refers to ensuring a steady flow of funds and revenue generation to maintain and continue the organization's work. In this regard, social workers should evaluate and be satisfied that the organization has a tangible plan that will be implemented should funding stop.
- ❖ **Programmatic Sustainability** means continuing with organizational projects and programs without donor support. Moreover, social workers should be cognizant of the (Kumi, Yeboah, & Kumi, 2020), which emphasizes environmental sustainability by ensuring that organizational activities are directed towards policies and standards that are consistent with addressing the root causes of poverty and oppression while promoting sustainable social environments that demonstrate respect for human rights and dignity.

Guidance must be provided for project members, and before writing the sustainability plan, there must be discussions with project teams on the various processes and mechanisms that ensure sustainability.

Sub-theme 2: Flexible and Standardised monitoring and evaluation tools

Participants indicated that one of the community projects' monitoring and evaluation challenges is that its members are not allowed to contribute towards developing monitoring tools. In this respect, the project's monitoring does not reflect project-related issues. Broadly, the

standardization of monitoring and evaluation tools is associated with improved functional performance. Standardized monitoring tools promote productivity by eliminating inefficiency. This process eliminates ambiguity and provides quality control, where tasks are completed more efficiently. There are fewer quality control issues from tasks that were not completed correctly the first time. A key aspect of the standardization of monitoring and evaluation tools is tied to employee morale; standardization helps social service professionals feel a sense of achievement and pride. In implementing the Kazan Government's M&E system, one of the key success factors is its application of simple tools regarded as clear and easily understood by the implementation staff (World Bank IEG, 2014).

"The Department recently introduced a huge monitoring tool, compared to the previous frameworks that we had. The tools were said to be simple so we could be flexible for data collection, but in my opinion, it is still big, complicated, and not easy to understand." **Participant 03**

According to the World Bank IEG (2014), implementing the Kazan Government's M&E system has simple tools, key success factors. Its implementation tools are clear and easily understood by the implementation staff, in contrast to the impressions submitted by **Participant 03**.

"We have been using these monitoring tools, and the monitoring model sometimes doesn't really provide practical solutions to the problems. When you look at it, I just say that I have monitored but it doesn't yield the results you can see, that it is just there for the purpose of saying somebody was here and checked something." **Participant 10**

Standardization does not mean monotony and lack of creativity; it can and should mean standards anyone can master and take pride in enhancing. Social workers need to be involved in the development of monitoring tools. This implies that social workers should play an active role in developing tools, and the consultation process should include them as internal stakeholders. The participant sentiments are echoed by the OECD (2016), which reported that monitoring tools and data collection methodologies should be flexible and relevant. Significantly, there should be enough finances to cater to these tools and ensure their sustainability by effectively training the personnel using them. Gorgens and Kusek (2009) emphasize that the tools must be based on the organization's needs. Social service professionals provide data for the department and monitor the quality of programmes. Furthermore, the language used in monitoring tools must be flexible, comprehensible, and unambiguous. The language must also be contextualized to address challenges at the grassroots level.

Sub-theme 3: Multidisciplinary Approach to Monitoring and Evaluation

Supporting poverty-alleviating community projects through monitoring a transdisciplinary approach plays a critical role in ensuring that all project gaps are identified and addressed on time. Community projects have many complex aspects, such as finances, capacity, skills, and management. Furthermore, different projects focus on different goals; some focus on growing crops, while others focus on farming, childcare, and development. Participants noted the need for the involvement of multidisciplinary teams, such as experts from different government departments, i.e., the Departments of Agriculture, Education, and Treasury, to assist whenever the need arose during the monitoring processes of projects. This group must form a multidisciplinary monitoring team that supports projects monthly. Sorrenson (2010:12) supports that as far as completed projects are concerned, with very few exceptions, the M&E systems have been poorly

calibrated and implemented at the field level. Weaknesses in M&E are traced back to the design of the M&E system, particularly the absence of clearly identifiable monitorable indicators and a lack of stakeholder accountability and participation.

Participants noted that the misalignment of planning, M&E, budgeting, performance management systems, and processes are due to a lack of leadership, a shortage of staff and skills, members working in silos, subjective and mismanaged performance, and the development of systems and pre-allocation of financial envelopes whose exclusive focus is on legislative compliance.

Participant 11 illustrated that:

"We are planning in silos; you find support service, like finance doing budget estimates, sitting somewhere. So, it is just compliance because the needs do not inform them on the ground."

Sub-theme 4: Specialized focus areas

Most participants indicated that one of the most significant advantages of specialization is reducing the risk of errors. Specialists are less likely to commit mistakes when conducting tasks than non-specialists. Specialists save time because if one keeps doing the same thing repeatedly, they become proficient in doing the task and save time. As a result, supervisors are encouraged to adopt the specialization approach, where social service professionals can focus on monitoring and evaluating poverty-alleviating community projects. This approach allows social service professionals to master monitoring and evaluation processes. It also allows the department to plan and budget for monitoring and evaluation processes. Kusters (2011) highlights that, in most cases, the M&E process is routine and has little expectation. Many perceive it as a way of pleasing donors (World Bank IEG, 2014) with little evidence of quality results (UNDP, 2008). There is no allocation of specific staff to the monitoring and evaluation department; hence, the level of specialization is low (Chaplowe, 2008).

Participant 09 supports these assertions:

"It is important for the department to ensure that relevant people responsible for monitoring and evaluating community projects are equipped with relevant skills to only support and focus on monitoring projects."

Sub-theme 5: Structured monitoring and evaluation unit

For the efficient and effective support and monitoring of poverty alleviation community projects, the Department of Social Development needs to ensure that the monitoring and evaluation units are at the national, provincial, and district levels. This will assist in the flow of monitoring and evaluation processes and data collection. The units must constitute qualified personnel with monitoring and evaluation acumen. The primary purpose of these units should be the capacitation and monitoring community projects. Participants responded that there is poor coordination in M&E activities and a lack of role clarification because there is no structured body to coordinate and manage M&E activities. (Vallejo, 2017) emphasizes the importance of an M&E culture, as illustrated in the quote below:

Participant 06 said:

"I am doing monitoring and evaluation for the sake of compliance and reaching targets because no office has thoroughly discussed or deliberated my findings and recommendations, so I am saying M&E within our department is very poor. However, if we had a proper structure of properly trained

evaluation officers who solely focus on M&E, I think we would have a very effective monitoring plan and outcomes."

Besides the formal elements of an M&E system, the informal culture of an organization is equally important. Is the managerial culture defensive, blaming and dismissing monitoring and evaluation findings? Or are M&E findings regarded as an opportunity to explore problems and openly engage in critical but constructive introspection? Much of these depend on the tone set by the institution's political heads and senior officials. Without a management culture that demands performance, M&E systems degenerate into superficial 'tick the checklist' exercises.

Sub-theme 6: Resource Allocation

Participants suggested that for a well-implemented monitoring and evaluation system, resources that include human, technical, and capital should be made available to support monitoring and evaluation processes. To outline their needs, social workers must be part of the initiative and its meetings and processes, especially during budget inputs. Budget allocation should address monitoring and evaluation needs such as the shortage of transport, working tools of trade, and training. Community organizations struggle to measure their impact due to insufficient funds and data. Participants highlighted that it is important for the Department of Social Development to develop mechanisms to ensure community project funding remains consistent and coherent.

Participant 7 reported:

"I would say the department should plan properly, especially regarding their funding and monitoring process. If they say they will give a project the money in the 3rd month, let it be so. That will enable them to plan their things properly because they plan to look at the budget. So, if there is no money, even if they can plan, you may find they just plan to fail. You see now....and again there should be some training to equip the project workers...like with the ECDs [early childhood development centres] and for the employees working for the department. We must be timeously equipped to improve our skills."

A project without a consistent funding source will flounder under the weight of its debt. Funding is the fuel a business runs, most importantly considering that NPOs depend on funding for survival since they do not generate profit. A lack of consistent funding hurts their ability to deliver services. Official development agency personnel often receive incentives to 'move money' to fulfill spending targets or develop a 'project approval culture', thus undermining the quality of a project's design. This implies that government departments spend money to achieve political targets and ignore the capacity evaluation of funded projects that use funds accordingly and ensure the viability of their business plan (Clement *et al.*, 2008).

Implications for the social work profession

One of the most significant challenges in South Africa is ensuring that progressive strategies are aimed at alleviating poverty, especially in rural areas. One of the challenges facing the government is that monitoring and evaluation are poorly coordinated or planned and do not adequately inform planning, policymaking, and budgeting (Ile *et al.*, 2012; Bromberg & Henderson, 2015). Therefore, government interventions miss the opportunity to improve the functioning of the project. Failure to develop coherent, inclusive strategies that support social workers' monitoring and evaluation processes will further result in the unsustainability of poverty alleviation community projects under the watch of social workers. The study established that monitoring and

evaluation processes in the DSD are not coherent, and social workers need more support and capacitation to implement M&E processes effectively. The following recommendations are that the Department of Social Development:

- ❖ policymakers who use a bottom-up approach in which social workers at the ground level are fully involved through consultations in developing policies, especially in developing monitoring and evaluation tools for poverty alleviation community projects.
- ❖ ensures that all social workers and their supervisors are enrolled in compulsory training or courses on monitoring and evaluation.
- ❖ critically revisits their funding model and criteria to improve their systems, which deal with poverty alleviation community projects.
- ❖ forges partnership with institutions of higher learning and the private sector to share knowledge and skills by working in tandem towards achieving the common goal of alleviating poverty.
- ❖ urges social workers to play the role of catalyst, resource developer, activist, coordinator, facilitator, broker, and advocate in promoting partnerships and curbing the duplication of services. The cooperation and collaboration of all partners is critical in bringing about positive transformation in rural communities.
- ❖ should ensure that before approving and funding project proposals, social workers undertake proper assessments to ascertain the necessity of the proposed project and the practicality of its sustainability in case funding is no longer available.

It is important to draw a detailed M&E plan at the project proposal level; all stakeholders must participate and ensure that the proposal and the proceedings of the meetings are documented. Priority must be given to baseline data collection and analysis early in the project cycle by focusing on variables that permit the counterfactual analysis of project outcomes. At baseline establishment, target groups should be identified to understand the socio-economic parameters and monitoring that should happen over the project's life and should not be marginalized. Ile *et al.* (2012) state that M&E should be operationally effective and methodologically sound for sustainable community projects. This requires considerable expertise in the planning stages to ensure that activities are properly designed and professional personnel are equipped to use appropriate M&E techniques.

CONCLUSION

The study provided evidence that the sustainability of poverty alleviation projects depends on a sound M&E system that is robust enough to answer the evaluation questions, promote learning, and satisfy accountability needs without being rigid or inflexible, such that it stifles the emergence of unexpected and surprising results. Before creating the M&E system, personnel needs to understand the program. Social workers need to know why the program was created, its goals, and how they should be achieved. They also need to know all these community projects' activities, outputs, and outcomes. The Department of Social Development must consider the above key recommendations to enhance poverty alleviation projects. The study further provided key criteria that social workers need to consider when supporting poverty alleviation initiatives and highlighted suggestions for improvement of M&E within the DSD.

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