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# Ticking Boxes or Making a Difference? The Real Impact of Monitoring Community Projects of Poverty Alleviation

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**Abstract**

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are central to community development projects, typically couched as necessary for accountability, learning, and measuring impact. There is a widespread suspicion that monitoring too often benefits bureaucracy more than meaningful social change. This article considers the tension between compliance-oriented monitoring and transformative impact. Based on critical literature and empirical data, it asks whether existing M&E practice can be disproportionately donor-focused and data-driven at the expense of community empowerment and learning. It contends that monitoring is necessary, but its worth depends on its design and implementation. The article invites a move towards participatory, context-sensitive monitoring practice focused on local relevance, learning, and long-term effects rather than box-ticking rituals. Dr Dipela Mmaphuti Percy, University of South Africa, Department of Social Work, South Africa

**Keywords:** Monitoring; Evaluation; Community Development; Community Projects; Poverty Alleviation.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) have been critical components of community development projects, commonly linked with donor requirements and accountability frameworks (Ostasius & Laukaitis, 2015). Governments, NGOs, and global agencies increasingly utilize M&E systems to track advancement, evaluate impacts, and justify the need for continuous funding (Bamberger, 2012; Rogers, 2014). M&E systems promote objectivity and openness, generating data-based analyses to assist decision-making and increase efficiency. However, a question is increasingly raised about whether monitoring enhances community outcomes or merely checks or ticks institutional boxes (Bakewell & Garbutt, 2005; Eyben, 2013). Cimdins and Skinkis (2011) argue that monitoring systems are more concerned with quantifiable indicators, timelines, and report forms that value efficiency over impact. This may downplay complex social change processes into quantifiable outputs, bypassing the voices and experiences of the communities whose lives the projects intend to enhance (Guijt, 2008). The pressure to show success may also incentivize shallow reporting or exaggerated results, detaching M&E practice from ground realities (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

Despite all these criticisms, good monitoring is still worth considering. Well-implemented monitoring can uncover gaps, hold individuals accountable, and enable communities by engaging

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them in learning and feedback cycles (Ostasius & Laukaitis, 2015). Kusek & Rist (2004) argue that monitoring is not the main problem, but how it is accomplished and carried out; for example, whether it becomes a learning and improvement tool or an administrative exercise unrelated to impact. This article tries to look deeper into the actual role of monitoring in supporting poverty alleviation initiatives and checking if anything is impactful to bring about social change, or if it is a more symbolic ceremonial formality focusing on institutional goals rather than community concerns. This article explores further and discusses how M&E efforts can move beyond compliance tasks to serve as drivers of change. 1550248624

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) are central in managing community development and poverty alleviation projects, promising greater accountability, effectiveness, and learning (Kusek & Rist, 2004). Ideally, M&E should inform decision-making, enhance project outcomes, and ensure that interventions address the real needs of the targeted populations. However, growing concerns have emerged regarding implementing M&E as a "tick-box" exercise, where reporting becomes an end rather than a tool for meaningful change (Guijt, 2014). Community developers, often positioned as the champions of monitoring at the grassroots level, encounter firsthand the tensions between donor-driven accountability requirements and the complexities of local realities. The rise of results-based management in international development has placed M&E at the forefront of project design and implementation (World Bank, 2011). Donors increasingly require standardized indicators, logical frameworks, and rigorous reporting systems as conditions for funding (Naidoo, 2011). While these systems aim to promote transparency and effectiveness, they often prioritize measurable outputs over complex social change processes, inadvertently encouraging a culture of compliance (Eyben, 2013). In the context of community-based poverty alleviation initiatives, this emphasis on standardized measurement can clash with the dynamic, participatory, and adaptive nature of grassroots development work. Community developers, tasked with implementing programmes and documenting results, frequently experience M&E processes as burdensome and disconnected from the realities they aim to address (Bakewell & Garbutt, 2005). As monitoring champions, they navigate between fulfilling external accountability demands and advocating for approaches that capture meaningful, locally relevant outcomes. This background frames the investigation into how community developers view current M&E practices and what changes are necessary to transform monitoring from a bureaucratic requirement into a tool for genuine empowerment and learning.

## GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMUNITY, PROBLEMS AND TARGET SOLUTIONS

### General description

While monitoring has been broadly recognized as a foundation of good community development, there is increasingly a disjuncture between intention and impact (Naidoo, 2011). The mainstream practice of monitoring is technocratic and quantitatively driven, top-down in focus, frequently more focused on donor accountability than responsive to the communities' needs (Eyben, 2013; Guijt, 2008). Thus, monitoring practices can be performative rituals fulfilling reporting obligations rather than contributing to actual learning or change (Bakewell & Garbutt, 2005; Wallace, 2006). This disconnect is most obviously identified in the definitions and measures of success. Standard indicators can quantify outputs and short-term outcomes but are less likely to capture complex,

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long-term, or qualitative change in communities (Govender, 2015). Furthermore, very few of them have voices from communities in significant ways, replacing local knowledge and resulting in participatory development not happening (Amin, Scheepers, & Malik, 2023). Imagining that which is measured will necessarily be controlled overlooks the political and social nature of development work (Mosse, 2005).

Despite the spread of M&E guidelines, there is poor evidence to support that monitoring will reliably produce enhanced project results or more community-driven efforts (Bamberger, 2012). This indicates the wide gap between the theoretical construction of M&E systems and implementation. One of the author's critical questions is: Are tools assisting projects in making an impact or assisting institutions in becoming legitimized? This article fills this knowledge gap by critically analyzing how monitoring is conceptualized and carried out in community work and whether it makes any difference to social change. It calls for reconsidering monitoring as an evolving process, not a box-ticking one, emphasizing local context, participation, and learning reflection.

## METHOD

The research strategy followed in conducting this investigation was an integrative literature review, chosen for its ability to integrate broad sweeps of theoretical and empirical materials and create new insights into complicated, under-theorized problems such as monitoring in community development (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Torraco, 2005). Since the goal of the current research was to critically explore whether monitoring in community-based initiatives indeed brings transformative change or rather follows largely institutional and donor priorities, the above design made it possible to incorporate academic journal articles, policy documents, NGO reports, and seminal theoretical work. Data were obtained from January to March 2024 through systematic literature search employing academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar using the following search terms "monitoring in community development," "participatory monitoring and evaluation," "development accountability," and "aid effectiveness and monitoring." Boolean operators were used to narrow searches, and backward citation tracking was utilized to detect influential or highly cited sources. Concurrently, grey literature was gathered from established organizations like the World Bank, DFID/FCDO, Oxfam, and UNICEF. Inclusion criteria were that sources were to be published between 2000 and 2023, specifically address monitoring (not overall M&E), be donor-funded or a community-based initiative, relevant, and be in English. Of 120 sources initially identified, 68 were accorded exhaustive scrutiny, and later on, 35 sources were finally chosen for exhaustive analysis based on conceptual richness, along with proximity to research issues. The documents were examined through the eyes of an inductive thematic synthesis process (Thomas & Harden, 2008), whereby general themes as focus areas were extracted that made up monitoring-as-compliance, exclusion of the voice of the community, misalignment of indicators, strategic reporting, and neglect of data use for adaptive learning. The themes were subsequently grouped into broad analytical categories that guided the presentation of the findings and discussion sections. The review drew on a critical interpretive methodology grounded in postcolonial and political development theory, i.e., how surveillance systems

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reconstitute and represent power relations, control narratives, and reproduce hegemonic epistemologies (Eyben, 2013; Mosse, 2005; Cornwall, 2007). While this approach allowed for rich and nuanced investigation, disadvantages are that useful non-English sources may be excluded and difficulties in using secondary data present, which restrict inferences regarding the lived experiences of communities. However, the depth and range of literature consulted offer a solid foundation for conceptual arguments forwarded in this research.

**Conceptual Context of Monitoring and Evaluation**

Monitoring has become a sign of development practice, central to how community-based projects are conceived, implemented, and evaluated. From the necessity of transparency, accountability, and performance monitoring, monitoring frameworks are now embedded in the operational rationale of most donor-funded interventions (Kusek & Rist, 2004; Hatry, 2006). Some scholars argue that good monitoring enables stakeholders to track progress, allocate resources optimally, and guarantee that projects deliver desired results (Rogers, 2014). Furthermore, the diffusion of monitoring tools has also caused heated critical contest among researchers and practitioners. Researchers debate the technical effectiveness of current methods and their philosophical grounds and ethical implications regarding power, inequality, and complexity, creating some challenges for the monitoring process.

**Technocratic Strategies and Their Shortcomings**

Mainstream monitoring strategies tend to be influenced by what has been described as a "technocratic paradigm" (Guijt, 2008; Bakewell & Garbutt, 2005). This is based on rational models, key performance indicators (KPIs), and strict timetables for measuring success. It is characterized by managerialism derived from the private sector, in which predictability, efficiency, and measurable outputs are paramount (Ostasius & Laukaitis, 2015). Although this method is attractive to sponsors and bureaucratic entities, as it can be done on a project-by-project comparison and involves standardized data, it has also been criticized for distorting the complicated, dynamic process of community transformation into oversimplified representations. Bakewell and Garbutt (2005) contend that these systems are divorced from local contexts and do not capture social change's insidious, non-linear nature. These systems, they argue, are more appropriate for measuring inputs and outputs, i.e., training sessions conducted, or materials given out, as opposed to outcomes like empowerment, participation, or behavior change. Projects can thus be excellent on paper but fail to achieve lasting or impactful change. Additionally, the rationale of these systems can have unintended effects. Wallace (2006) illustrates how NGOs might distort statistics or emphasize activities easiest to quantify, rather than those most needed by the community. This kind of "perverse accountability" operates against learning and transparency, exactly those ends that monitoring is supposed to help.

Participatory Approaches and the Struggle for Relevance Conversely, participatory monitoring approaches responded to such criticisms, prioritizing local control, learning, and empowerment (Clement, Chianca & Sisaki, 2008). Participatory approaches believe monitoring must never be top-down but rather one in which communities become involved in defining success and how it is being measured. Participatory monitoring aims to demobilize information and restructure power within development relations by engaging local actors in selecting indicators, gathering data, and analyzing results. Podems, Golden, and Jacobs (2014) conceptualize participatory

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monitoring as a capacity-building block that constructs people's agency and enhances accountability to them, not through them. This model promotes iterative learning and adaptation to ensure that projects adapt according to feedback. However, even with its potential, participatory monitoring remains neglected in reality. Guijt (2008) discovers that it is usually considered time-consuming, resource-intensive, and hard to reconcile with donor requirements for comparable, aggregate data. Scholars also doubt whether participatory approaches are necessarily always participatory in intention or impact. Cooke and Kothari (2001) became infamous for alerting us to the "tyranny of participation" because they claimed participatory processes are manipulable to simulate local ownership but consolidate current power arrangements.

**Evidence, Use, and Organizational Incentives**

Another recurring worry in the literature is the absence of evidence that monitoring systems help to enhance practice. Bamberger (2012) points out that although monitoring systems produce high amounts of data, little or none is ever examined or used in decision-making. The reasons are limited staff capacity, lack of time, and poor incentives for truthful reflection, particularly when funders reward success alone. Monitoring data can be "ritualistic," according to Eyben (2013), employed to market success stories rather than to report uncomfortable truths. Patton (2011), a developmental evaluation author, contends that monitoring systems should monitor implementation and facilitate timely learning in fast-changing contexts. His strategy follows an adaptive, utilization-focused evaluation that prioritizes change and context. Nevertheless, his strategy is not widely practiced in mainstream development, where logframes and fixed indicators are standard. Mosse's (2005) ethnographic research provides a critical insight by demonstrating how monitoring is inextricably linked with institutional politics and the imperatives of legitimacy. He contends that project stories are not kept alive through evidence but through strategically staging stories, data, and expectations. Monitoring reports in this case are more concerned with keeping the plausibility of achievement alive than learning.

**Power and Politics in Monitoring**

Underneath many of these controversies is a sense that monitoring is always political. It comes to record and replicate power relations in development systems. Choices about what to measure, how, and who makes the measurement are highly political (Eyben, 2013; Guijt, 2008). Donor agendas, economic efficiency, institutional outputs, and technical fixes are typically embodied in standardized indicators but bypass intangible or negotiable community values, such as culture, dignity, or justice. This critique also introduces an epistemological question underneath: what knowledge and whose knowledge matters. Participatory researchers hold that monitoring will repeat distorted knowledge frameworks unless communities can build and speak for information (Clement, Chianca & Sisaki, 2008). Ostasius & Laukaitis (2015) contend that redesigning monitoring involves new tools and mindsets appreciating learning, skepticism, and local voice more than control and standardization.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

**Monitoring as Procedural Compliance**

A common thread running through the literature is that monitoring in community development is more of a bureaucratic need than a learning tool. Monitoring systems are geared towards donor

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needs, where compliance is more important than development. Literature suggests that NGO and donor reports usually focus on timely data submission, meeting log frames, and completion of pre-agreed activities against pre-agreed indicators. The higher-level indicator matrices of lead outputs, quarterly accounts, and performance spreadsheets provide managerial convenience and comparability but are finally tools of external accountability. Mosse (2005) and Eyben (2013) argue that such a procedural approach is more likely to avoid reflection and adaptation, with limited evidence of successive project revision depending on monitoring experience. The literature indicates that monitoring systems are far too frequently inflexible project planning components, resistant or incapable of accommodating in the face of changing conditions or emergent learning requirements, doing more for institutional legitimacy than for developmental responsiveness.

**Misalignment Between Indicators and Impact**

Evidence also describes a persistent misalignment between indicators of monitoring and longer-term, larger community development goals. Narrowly defined, quantitative indicators such as the amount of training conducted, the number of households reached, or the number of microloans issued are the most common usage by programmes. Although easy to measure, they often do not capture complex, change-oriented outputs such as empowerment, behavior change, or resilience. Once set during the project planning stage, indicators seldom have to be reshaped or sharpened, even with changing context. This cuts down development success to what is easily measurable, not necessarily what matters to affected groups (Guijt, 2008). For instance, measuring income-generating activities in livelihood projects might fail to capture overriding concerns like sustainability or intra-household dynamics. This reductionist approach can lead to an unbalanced understanding of impact, as it privileges the measurable over the important.

**Marginalization of Community Voices**

Despite widespread rhetoric supporting participatory monitoring, the reviewed literature reveals that community participation is lacking. In most cases, participation is superficial, confined to feedback workshops or end-line surveys, and not echoed in indicator development or data analysis. Such exclusion continues the top-down production of knowledge in which outside experts dictate what evidence is and how it is to be gathered (Eyben, 2013; Guijt, 2008). Where they occur, feedback processes are independent, not integral components of monitoring and management processes. Absence of embedded local community feedback is evidence of a larger "power imbalance in development practice," where donors' upward accountability is greater than downward accountability to local beneficiaries. Authors like Cooke and Kothari (2001) and Wallace (2006) have maintained that embracing participatory language has not weakened top-down monitoring practices, which still work on the premise of external schedules and agendas**.**

**Strategic Reporting and Data Manipulation**

Another issue cited in the literature includes strategically manipulating monitoring data to develop success tales. Literature contends that monitoring for large donor-financed projects plays down failure or omission of setbacks, challenges, or unforeseen impacts (Engela & Ajam, 2010). The lessons learned segments feature only minor procedural issues, not organizational or strategic failures. Fueled by funding pressures, this donor-selective reporting produces clean reports that dampen honest learning and adaptation (Mosse, 2005; Eyben, 2013). This can undermine trust, conceal system problems, and destroy learning cultures in implementing organizations.

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**Underuse of Learning from Monitoring Data**

Finally, the most recurring theme in the literature is the underuse of monitoring data to inform decision-making or support adaptive learning. While projects systematically produce data and prepare reports, such outputs are rarely used to enhance strategies or modify interventions. Monitoring is often kept parallel to project management cycles and undertaken merely because one is supposed to do so. Structural limitations like inflexible funding arrangements and tight reporting schedules make things more difficult, with limited room for adjustment even when fresh knowledge emerges. Moreover, organizations may not have staff, systems, or cultures that can process and react to information. Patton (2011) contends that rigorous assessment requires more than information collection; it demands a responsiveness culture, critical thinking, and continuous learning. Without these conditions, monitoring is an exercise in bureaucracy rather than a developmental tool.

**Discussions and implications for practice**

The results outlined in this research show the gloomy reality of the existing practice of monitoring community development. Institutionally normalized, its potential for transformation is not realized. Instead, it exists within audit and control logics informed by donor demands, risk avoidance at the institutional level, and bureaucratic culture. These are elaborated in greater detail within this analysis, situating the analysis in the broader theoretical currents around institutional learning, knowledge, and power within development practice.

Perhaps the most sensational finding of the study is the technicisation of monitoring as a technocratic practice, a force most severely criticized in critical development literature. Utilizing Foucault's conceptualization of "governmentality," researchers have demonstrated that monitoring is not merely a measurement device, but also a discipline technology governing conduct and reiterating institutional order (Miller & Rose, 2008; Li, 2007). Prioritizing indicators, log frames, and performance measures illustrates how governance technologies abridge complex social realities into forms that can be governed. Notably, monitoring is employed as a control system, not of communities, but of success stories in the aid regime. Development actors, especially those reliant on external funding, are interested in generating reports that resonate with donor agendas and institutional rationalities. This creates what Miller (2008) calls "rituals of verification," where appearance is used as a proxy for substance.

The implication is profound in that monitoring replicates dominant ideologies of effectiveness and efficiency, rather than reinforcing adaptive learning or supporting community empowerment, hiding failure, and restricting the epistemic space for opposition, experimentation, or complexity. Monitoring disciplines practice into a measurable and manageable form, avoiding the intangible, relational, and contested dynamic of social change. A second key implication is epistemological hierarchy in hegemonic monitoring systems. Lack of community-defined indicators and subordination of experiential knowledge suggest a more profound concern in that institutional prioritization of "scientific" or expert knowledge over experiential, local knowledge of change (Cornwall, 2007). Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice plays a critical role here, where communities are sidelined from knowledge production and made epistemically subordinate in monitoring systems.

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This epistemic marginalization is not so much a technical failing; it is an instance of larger postcolonial trends of development hegemony in which power works through the power to set what constitutes evidence, whose voice merits listening, and what it means to succeed. Participatory monitoring is invoked as the answer, but as shown here, it too frequently is not put into practice beyond superficial semblance. As Cornwall and Coelho (2007) contend, authentic participation is more than inscription; it requires the redistribution of power to deliberation and signification. Thus, any serious rethink of monitoring strategies must challenge epistemic hierarchies in this manner and provide positive space for various knowledges, for narrative, stories, and culture-sensitive forms of evaluation that displace audit culture hegemony.

The most disconcerting discovery is the rampant failure of applying the monitoring information to learn and improve. This is not a capacity requirement but an organizational failure that discourages thinking and rewards conformance. Learning takes second place to performance management in this setting. As Engela & Ajam (2010) differentiated, most organizations display "single-loop learning," and problems are resolved without challenging assumptions. However, " double-loop learning " is required, where surveillance stimulates rethinking of values, strategy, and change models. However, development institutions are institutionally, of course, resistant to such reflexivity. Bureaucracies, by definition, prefer predictability, order, and low-risk things, which are, in essence, in conflict with the messiness of social change (Podems, Golden, and Jacobs, 2014). Excessively embedded monitoring systems encourage linearity and closure over curiosity and complexity. Decoupling of monitoring from practice continues accordingly, even where data points out gaps or contradictions, institutional arrangements do not leave much space for responsive adaptation. This also contradicts assumptions of evaluation theory that learning will be an inevitable byproduct of information availability. As Tsoukas and Chia (2002) assert, learning is not so much a function of access to knowledge as it is a function of sensemaking, dialogue, and organizational openness to ambiguity. Even the most advanced monitoring systems without these preconditions cannot generate effective change.

The strategic import of these observations lies not in merely making technical adjustments to the existing monitoring systems. Instead, they challenge us to reimagine monitoring in an entirely new way, including how it is thought about, appreciated, and realized. This change involves breaking with the idea of monitoring as a means of control and legitimation to simply seeing it as a practice of inquiry, empowerment, and ethical responsibility (Naidoo,2011). A central move in such a transformation is to reclaim monitoring as a political practice. This means acknowledging that data is never neutral, and that assessment holds power relations within it. Monitoring needs to be constructed as a site of negotiation around meaning, legitimacy, and voice, where contest, diversity, and reflexivity are allowed within the process (Hutto & Belote, 2013). A natural extension of this is the inclusion of deliberative participation. Real participation is far more than token consultation; it is co-designing, collaborative analysis, and collective decision-making. To achieve this degree of involvement, one requires methodological imagination, institutional incentives, and a culture shift where local actors are co-producers of knowledge and not receptive informants (Iddi & Nuhu,2018).

Another fundamental implication is the need for building adaptive and emergent learning. In order to facilitate authentic learning, development organizations should equip themselves with

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adaptive capacities such as dialogue, feedback, and mechanisms of continuous iteration. This requires letting go of lock-step log frame methods and choosing more adaptive approaches to planning that can deal with complexity and uncertainty (Patton, 2011; Ramalingam et al., 2013). Nevertheless, this is not likely to happen without the need to respond to the disproportionate power of the donors. Donors are powerful enough to influence monitoring systems, and transformation requires re-imagining funding architecture. It demands longer-term commitments, relaxed requirements for reporting, and greater acceptability of complexity and uncertainty. Donor commitment is required to prevent attempts at shifting monitoring practice from coming unstuck. Lastly, an investment in reflexive practice is necessary. Monitoring must be a technical function, and space for critical reflection. Experts need time, skills, and institutional backing to challenge assumptions, raise tough questions, and work constructively with ambiguity. This conversation requires a transformational ethos of monitoring from compliance to embracing complexity, rooted in justice. Such an ethos knows that accountable meaning is not accomplished through measurements but through relations, conversation, and trust. It knows that community building is not a one-way delivery mechanism, but a co-evolutionary process influenced by multiple actors, interests, and values. Finally, the aim is not to deny monitoring, but to reclaim its revolutionary potential: to shed light upon, to interrogate, to learn, and to act anew. To that end, monitoring can emancipate itself from the action of engineering success and become a force that animates genuine, participatory, and people-driven development.

In summary, this research confirms a core criticism in the literature. Although monitoring is ubiquitous in community development practice, it is often collapsed into a bureaucratic process prioritizing compliance rather than learning, and outputs rather than impact. Indicators tend to be decoupled from the everyday life of communities, and participatory monitoring is still more talk than action. Strategic reporting and restricted application of data for reflection also indicate that monitoring in its current iteration is not necessarily supporting more profound forms of change. This examination poses a fundamental question at the center of this article: Are monitoring systems intended to matter, or have they become mechanisms that fulfill institutional needs at the cost of transformative potential? Resolving this question calls for technical reforms and reconsidering the values, incentives, and power arrangements governing the development sector's monitoring practice.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This paper has critically analyzed the role and everyday practice of monitoring in community development projects, challenging whether current practice leads to social change or just box-ticking to meet institutional needs. Based on findings and discussions informed by extant literature, the conclusion is that monitoring is utilized more for compliance with process than for adaptive learning or empowerment of the community. The reliance on standardized indicators, low levels of community engagement, and strategic data presentation, all by themselves and cumulatively, indicate a donor expectation and risk-averse monitoring culture. Monitoring, far from being an internal reflective exercise of development dynamics, is often a closed system that produces data confirming already established narratives but not contradicting or reformulating them. Such practices have profound, far-reaching effects. They mask the worth of local process

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change and silence the voices that development places at the forefront. In so doing, today's monitoring systems can potentially duplicate power imbalances and reinforce a performance-based mentality that prioritizes control over cooperation and verification over vision. In order to be genuinely effective, monitoring needs to be remapped not as a goal-oriented tool but as a political and relational practice that can foster accountability, participation, and learning. This calls for a change in form and mindset from linearity, standardization, and extrinsic regulation towards flexibility, responsiveness, and bottom-up processes.

Based on critical review and research, important recommendations are made to policymakers, practitioners, and donors for transforming monitoring systems in community development. Monitoring first needs to be redirected toward learning and adaptation. It entails shifting its primary purpose from compliance reporting to facilitating reflective practice, adaptive management, and evidence-informed decision-making. Monitoring practices need to leave room for uncertainty, experimentation, and chances of course correction. Second, community-based monitoring must be mainstreamed. Communities must be brought to the center of identifying indicators, collecting data, and interpreting results so that the process becomes embedded within their values and priorities. Participatory processes must not be peripheral additions but central components of monitoring systems. Third, quantitative measures must be balanced against qualitative descriptions. Mixed-method instruments must be developed to capture tangible results and multifaceted social impacts, such as attitude change, empowerment, and unanticipated consequences. Narrative and experiential insight must be rewarded equally with numbers. Fourth, the reporting needs of donors have to be made flexible. Donors need to offer more flexibility in reporting designs so that implementing agencies can submit context-specific learning instead of blanket indicators only. Moreover, a mix of funding approaches is required. In addition to grants, longer-term funding cycles must be established to emphasize iterative learning and outcomes. Investment in organizational capacity and culture is also essential, including establishing internal systems and staff capacity for the use of data, critical reflection, and learning. Organizations must also construct cultures that can tolerate failure, respect dissent, and prioritize accountability to communities over performative success. Finally, monitoring must be regarded as a political and ethical practice. Monitoring operates to define how knowledge is created and whose voice is being heard. Monitoring processes must therefore be carried out openly, participatorily, and ethically in a way that demands equity, justice, and local agency principles.

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