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Moving forwards with participatory monitoring and evaluation

by **KAREN HILLYER** and **SIMONE PUROHIT**

Introduction

In 2001 a series of projects funded through the UK Department for International Development (DfID) Natural Resources Systems Programme was set up in six villages in Hubli Dharwad in Karnataka, India. The villages are at the so-called peri-urban interface, where rural and urban meet in an area of rapid change brought about by the growing demands of the urban. The projects aimed to identify and test strategies and processes that could increase the capacity of peri-urban communities to adapt their natural resource management and livelihoods strategies in response to the changes associated with living in peri-urban areas. Self-help groups (SHGs) were formed in all the villages that were involved in the planning, implementation and monitoring.

This article describes the process followed in establishing participation of self-help groups in monitoring and evaluation (referred to here as PM&E) and key lessons learnt from the experience. It shows in particular how barriers to progress were dealt with and what benefits were achieved.

Getting to grips with PM&E

The issue of participation in the process of monitoring and evaluation was considered in a meeting with most members of the multi-agency, multi-disciplinary project team. Although

“.... to be truly participatory, the self-help groups had not only to define the indicators to be used, but also decide how to measure them, who would do this, and how frequently”

all were familiar to varying degrees with the concept of ‘participation’ and recognised the importance of collaborative processes, only a few had first-hand experience with PM&E.¹

Realising that the difference between the information needs of the self-help groups and the project made the outcomes from a process of PM&E uncertain. So surveys were planned and designed by the project team to ensure that they obtained the type of data necessary to respond to projective objectives. To establish a separate but complementary participatory monitoring and evaluation system, a PM&E

¹ BAIF Development and Research Foundation, Indian Development Service, Best Practices Foundation, (NGO sector) and University of Agricultural Sciences, Dharwad, India, Centre for Arid Zones Studies and School of Agriculture and Forest Sciences of the University Wales, Bangor, UK and The Development Planning Unit, University College, London, UK (academic sector).

**SHG members
involved in
dairy activities
measuring
their indicators**



Photo: Simone Purohit

sub-team (of which the authors of this article were a part) was formed with members from each of the agencies involved. Two were subsequently sent on a three week participatory monitoring and evaluation course at the International Institute for Rural Reconstruction (IIRR) in the Philippines.

Initial efforts at PM&E and lessons learnt

The team worked together with a couple of self-help groups to identify indicators of change. Although it was difficult to explain the concept of indicators to the self-help group members this process gave an interesting but expansive list. After indicators were collected from all the villages a more manageable number was short-listed. Indicators, methods or measures were modified accordingly and the process of trial and reflection was repeated. As they were based on indicators derived from discussions with the self-help group

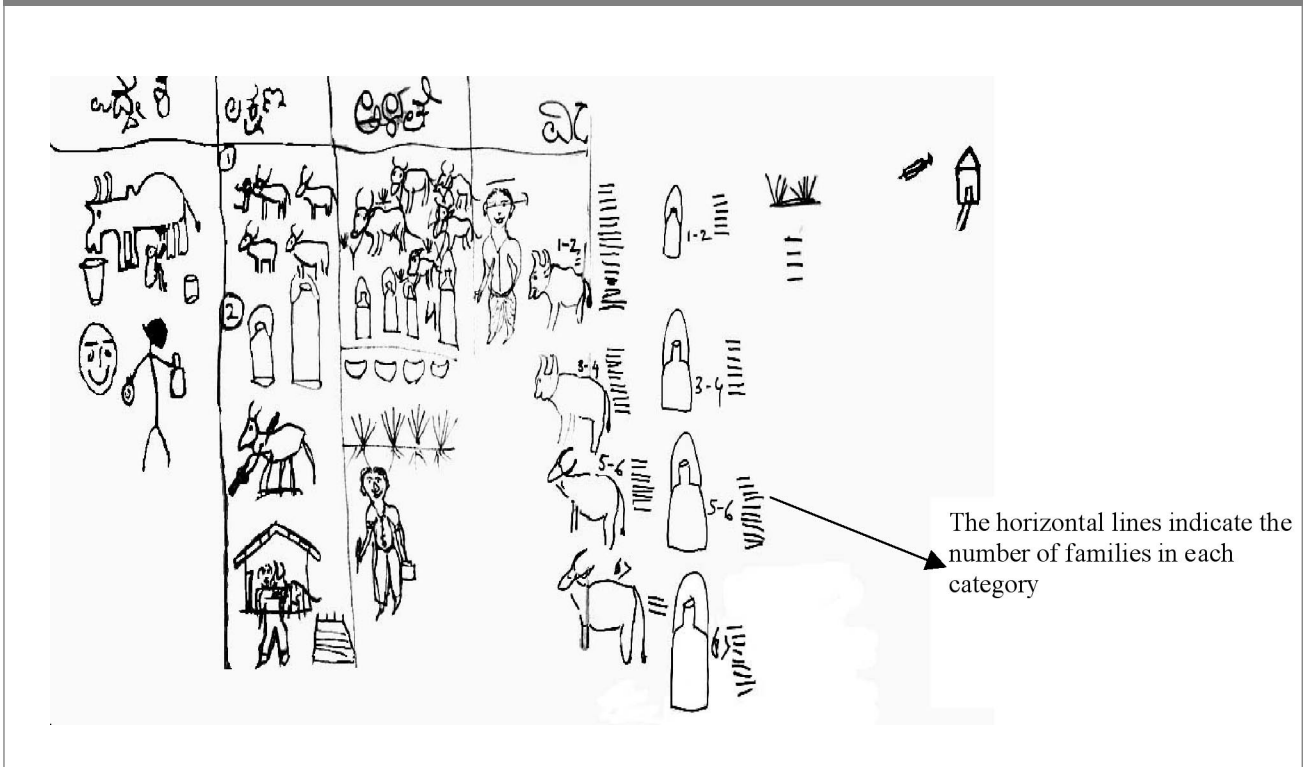
members, these indicators were known as participatory indicators (PIs).

Establishing higher levels of participation

With further reflection the team was dissatisfied with the level of participation, feeling that they were not being 'truly' participatory. The team realised that it dominated the process, despite the involvement of self-help groups in the identification of indicators in the early stages. To be truly participatory, the self-help groups had not only to define the indicators to be used, but also decide how to measure them, who would do this and how frequently.

As a result the team decided to experiment with higher levels of participation by following the approach proposed in the IIRR training. By this time the project was already two-thirds of the way through and the team realised that it could

Figure 1: Initial participatory monitoring diagram, Gabbur village, July 2004



not be sure of the outcomes of this approach. For this reason the team decided to continue using the participatory indicators and methods as described above, at the same time as trying out and developing a more inclusive procedure.

Developing a more inclusive process

The team worked with six self-help groups (one per village, each covering one of the six main strategies) to identify indicators for each of their objectives, how these would be measured, who would measure them and how frequently. These various aspects were indicated by the self-help group members pictorially (see Figure 1).

In most cases the participants adjusted the original plans themselves following their first experiences of using the monitoring approach. This gave them a better understanding of what would give useful information. Figure 2 shows how the method developed and how the measurements were recorded. The group worked out specific details, for example, the milk yield should be the quantity of pure milk and not the quantity sold, which is often watered down, and how to get complete information if some members were not present at the meetings.

Although this approach eventually led to the achievement of some effective PM&E plans, the team found the procedure very difficult to carry out. It was hard to grasp the differences between the objectives and indicators and between indicators and methods, and methods and measures, and the team's own lack of clarity frustrated attempts to facilitate the process with some of the self-help groups.

It was also time-consuming to complete a whole plan and was not enjoyable or rewarding, and therefore not likely to be continued after the end of the project. In one case, a clear plan had not yet been achieved despite several attempts to facilitate the process. It was clear the approach had been too arduous, so that it was difficult to get to a point where something had been learnt and activities modified by the self-help groups as a result of the monitoring.

The importance of completing a whole PM&E cycle

A breakthrough came when some of the results from data collected from each self-help group for a simple participatory indicator (numbers of meetings held) were analysed and represented graphically. When these were shown to the self-help groups they became very interested and could see the

Table 1: Numbers of loans taken and repaid and their uses (records taken from pictogram)

Name of member	Loans taken	Repaid	Production (number of loans taken)	Consumption (number of loans taken)
Kalavva	5	3	Mango saplings, buffalo, shop, fertiliser (4)	Hospital (1)
Kamalavva	4	3	Fertiliser, to plough the field (2)	Hospital, slate (2)
Gangavva	3	2		Vessel, groceries, wedding (3)
Basavva	2	2		
Sujata	3	2	Poultry, harvesting of grains (2)	Tiles for roof of house (1)
Vimalaxi	3	2		
Malavva	3	3	Goat and fertiliser (twice) (3)	
Iravva	2	1	Cow (1)	School fees (1)
Shantavva	3	3	Tailoring machine, to buy mango saplings (2)	Hospital (1)
Ansavva	1	0		A cupboard to give her daughter who got married (1)
Renavva	2	1	Fertiliser (twice) (2)	
Iravva H	1	1		Stones to build house (1)
Totals ¹	32	23	16	11

¹ Figures do not add up as 2 members were absent at this stage in the meeting.

implications of the patterns and how their own progress compared with that of other self-help groups, and wanted to discuss the differences.

Upon further reflection it was noted that if self-help groups were involved in completing the whole procedure quickly in one or two sessions, from identifying an indicator right through to the final stage of analysing the implications of the results, it would help them to understand the ultimate purpose of M&E. This was tried in the village where most difficulties had been faced.

The indicator 'capacity of the self-help group to develop and manage micro-credit for members' and its measure, 'the number of loans issued and repaid', was tried by the self-help group members. The method of measurement involved every member going up to a piece of flip-chart paper on the wall to draw circles against their names representing each loan they had taken. Then, if they had repaid the loan, they crossed through the circle. As one participant said, 'Our names are there and how many loans we have taken. Once we have repaid we will know and we get to know who has taken the loans'. Before, this had only been known by those able to keep the records in the record book. The members then divided the loans taken according to the purpose for which they were taken – production or consumption – and analysed them. After six months they did another round where they indicated any fresh loans they had taken, what they were for, and whether loans already taken out had been repaid.

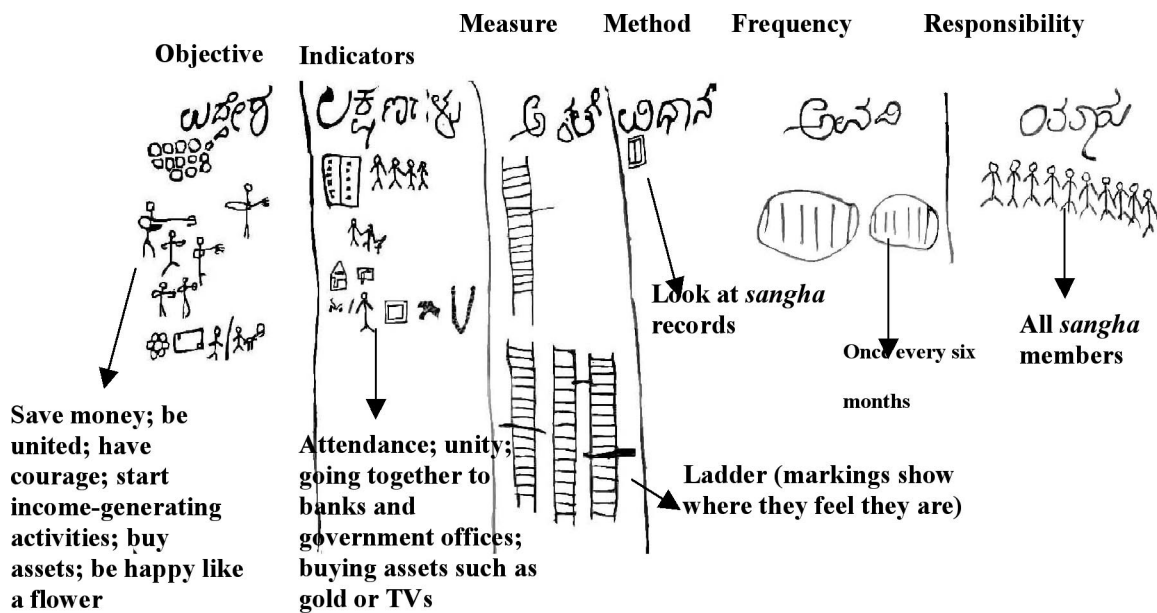
This modified approach begins with identifying one indicator instead of many, followed by working out how it should be measured, with suggestions from both team and self-help group members. The rest of the process was also fully collaborative, right to the point where self-help group members were interpreting information that was brought together and presented in a way that they could repeat independently. At this early stage in learning about monitoring and evaluating activities, it is helpful if the indicator and measure are simple and easily measurable to give quick results for immediate interpretation.

Collaboration improves quality

After considerable trial and error the team started to understand what methods and measures work best, and to recognise that identifying effective means of measuring indicators can influence the potential value of the indicator itself. In the end the team saw that the methods designed with the self-help groups were more useful than the methods that were developed by the team in isolation. An example of this is adoption of a ladder scale (Box 1).

The original method had been to count the number of members who had made visits to officials and calculate the difference every monitoring period (6 months). However this measure was considered weak in terms of sensitivity and validity. Members may not have needed to visit officials during that period, and some officials were easier to deal with than others. Using the ladder scale had several advan-

Box 1: Monitoring the development of Laxmi self-help group in Mugad

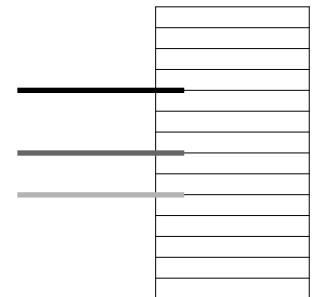


In the participatory monitoring diagram below, the measure used was a ladder. The ladder has 16 rungs (each rung representing one *anna*, an old form of currency where 16 *annas* made a rupee). Assuming that they were at the bottom when they started the self-help group, group members marked off on the ladder where they were at the moment. They had discussions for each of the indicators and came to a consensus as to which rung they were at. Since the measurement involved only drawing a ladder and marking off against a rung of the ladder the women felt more confident of being able to go up to the chart and do it themselves.

For courage, they included going to the bank on their own, meeting government officials and being able to deal with the police. They gave themselves 12 *annas* (upper line) (equivalent to a 75% improvement).

For regularity and attendance of meetings they said that they were at 8 *annas* (middle line). This included regular meetings, held on time, which everyone attends (equivalent to a subjective 50% improvement)

For income-generating activities they felt that they had done as much as they could for now but there was a lot more that they could do. This is because they are poor and illiterate and are unwilling to take on big risks. They gave themselves 6 *annas* (lower line equivalent to a 37% improvement).



tages in that it was simple, more immediately completed and used the whole self-help group as unit of analysis, i.e., it looked at how they were able to tackle situations together when they needed official support. This kind of scale requires discussion and consensus, in which the real issues behind the score are raised each time it is reviewed, as well as being easy to do.

Conclusion: what was achieved?

Capacity-building of the team and the self-help groups

The experience and knowledge gained from the training was shared among the PM&E team during reflection meetings, which resulted in informal monitoring of the levels of participation in the various research efforts designed. It did not

An illiterate SHG woman drawing indicators to monitor their SHG functioning.



Photo: Simone Purohit

provide the team with answers to all of the 'how to' questions, but provided them with a starting point, the willingness to experiment, and a more thorough understanding of the ultimate objective of participation in monitoring and evaluation against which to monitor their own progress.

With the experience gained by the end of the project the team had overcome many difficulties associated with facilitating the participatory monitoring and evaluation process. Not least was knowing what of their own ideas they can contribute and when to intervene without dominating. The most significant lesson was the specific realisation that the **rapid completion** of a full cycle of design, collection, analysis and interpretation of a simple single indicator helps the participants to appreciate the purpose and ultimate value of

monitoring and evaluation and how they could do it themselves. It took a considerable amount of time, and perseverance to arrive at this stage. The project then came to an end, so there was little opportunity to see how well the self-help groups did with their participatory monitoring and evaluation plans after the first or second round of measurements, or to see how they could be improved or added to as capacity increased. However, the impression of the team was that further development would have been possible.

After project support has ended

Amongst the many identified, the only indicators, methods and measures likely to be sustained are the ones which incorporate:

- a tangible relevance to needs;
- ease of measurement and interpretation;
- ease of sharing and comparing results; and
- open discussion, reflection and hence immediate learning.

In this list there is an emphasis on the way the information is interpreted, including sharing, comparing and discussing results. This is where the real end product of PM&E is realised. It is at this point that self-help group members can see if the efforts put into M&E have been of sufficient value to motivate their continued use.

Considering the continuity of monitoring and evaluation practices amongst the self-help groups raises the issue of comparative analysis. With the assistance of the project some of the self-help groups were encouraged to compare visual presentations of data collected from their own and other self-help groups in the area, which they found useful. This coordinating function of the project would need to be taken on by a local institution, such as the federation of self-help groups set up as part of the leaving strategy of the project.

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NOTE

The views presented in this article are not necessarily those of DfID.

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