Devising an Appropriate Strategy for Capacity Building of a National Monitoring and Evaluation System: Lessons from Selected African Countries

National monitoring and evaluation systems (NMES) are crucial to countries’ good functioning. The difficulty is for governments to believe in the utility of the NMES and understand its benefits to them. This is why it is important for countries to own these systems, integrating them into their national development plans and the operations of their respective governments. This article examines NMES in Benin, Botswana, Ethiopia, Mauritania, and Senegal in order to analyze the existing patterns within these countries and draw lessons from them to better inform future NMES capacity development. It finds that a strategy and action plan for NMES development is needed if improvements are to be made.
Introduction

In recent years, emphasis has been shifting to a new paradigm on national monitoring and evaluation (M&E) capacity development—from a historical pattern of M&E being carried out primarily in the context of cooperation and development aid, to the concept of M&E capacity being centered around national ownership that is linked to a country’s national vision, accountability, and good governance. The declaration of 2015 as the ‘Year of Evaluation’ and the advent of Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2016, have both reinforced movement in this direction, as well as raised expectations about the pace of M&E development at a country level. With a change in the frame of reference for national monitoring and evaluation system (NMES) development, the nature of a capacity-building strategy—including support that may be given by the international community to NMES development—also needs to be modified. NMES development, including M&E capacity gaps, needs to be considered in a broader context and built around more than simply traditional training initiatives. To work toward the goal of a sustainable, effective, national, and country-owned NMES, key foundation pieces such as infrastructure and supporting institutions need to be developed, along with training of country officials.

This article examines NMES capacity building in the broader context of this new paradigm, examining the state of NMES development in five African countries—Benin, Botswana, Ethiopia, Mauritania, and Senegal—to explore and identify patterns and lessons that can inform future NMES capacity development in general.

Background: A framework for developing an NMES

If an M&E system is to be owned by a country, it needs to be linked to the country’s national development plan and integrated into the operations and culture of government institutions. To be sustainable though, governments must believe in the utility of the NMES and understand its benefits to them. But, to do so, they must own the system. In other words, national ownership implies a particular cultural, social, and political context (Segone 2010). With good governance as a broad goal, and the driver behind developing an NMES, its development can be thought of as resting on two overarching influences: (i) the political will for change within a country and (ii) technical factors that will influence the pace of M&E infrastructure development. Upon these two foundation pieces sit four essential building blocks:

- The vision of the leadership within the country;
- An enabling environment for an M&E system to develop and function;
- The capacity to supply and analyze M&E information—technical capacity to measure, evaluate and analyze performance and provide credible and timely information; and,
The capacity within the system to demand and use M&E information—key users include government institutions, ministries, citizens, media, and other stakeholders.

Political support is an essential driver to launch and fund the NMES exercise; lead needed change in organizational culture; provide NMES champion(s); ensure an enabling environment; deflect resistance to M&E and the changes it might imply; and help ensure long-term sustainability of the NMES. However, the successful development of an NMES takes more than political will. Even with a resource commitment to invest in M&E development, there may be technical hurdles that require a lengthy process to put in place and develop credible data systems. In addition, it takes time to train monitoring specialists and evaluators and educate managers throughout the system on how and where M&E information will be used. This is generally a lengthy and iterative process, as the experiences of most countries using M&E systems confirm, and one where allowance for continuous learning and improvement through oversight mechanisms is particularly beneficial to the improvement of the NMES.

Historically, efforts in many countries have been directed at improving the supply of M&E information, though most often in the context of individual projects or priority sectors such as health or education, but generally not in a comprehensive fashion inherent in an NMES. Further, the demand for or use of M&E information has often been linked primarily to funding or reporting requirements from donors or international agencies—for example, requirements of Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) funding or Millennium Development Goal (MDG) progress reporting. In other words, M&E systems, where they have existed, have often been piecemeal and not necessarily aligned with the broader set of a country’s national development goals. Additionally, the NMESs quite likely are missing many key institutional components and the infrastructure needed to make them both national in scope as well as sustainable.

While each country is unique and faces its own challenges in “growing” an NMES, implicit in the framework of Figure 1 are some important considerations for NMES development:

- A broad set of players needs to be involved in NMES development

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**Figure 1: Four Essential Building Blocks for an Effective NMES**

- **Vision of Leadership**
- **Political will for Change**
- **Capacity to Supply and Analyze M&E Information**
- **Capacity to Demand and Use M&E Information**
- **Enabling Environment**
- **Development Pace of M&E Infrastructure**
The goal is not simply to create an M&E capability, but to use performance/evaluative information to improve public sector management and governance. As such, a capability within government is being created to both generate (that is, supply) performance information as well as to use performance information in decision-making by government managers.

The use of (or demand for) M&E information will function if there are effective incentives built into the system.

Training and development is required for both technical analysts as well as nontechnical managers in government—these are the eventual users of the M&E information who will need to understand how and where M&E information can help them in the management of their programs and policies. Senior and political officials need sufficient M&E knowledge so that they grasp the importance of the NMES in achieving the high-order goals of accountability, results-based management (RBM), and sound governance for the country.

While each country is unique in how far and how fast it may roll out their national M&E capability (and indeed, how that may be institutionalized), under the new paradigm, countries share the broad goal of developing an effective and sustainable NMES, centered around national ownership and M&E that is linked to the national vision of the country, accountability, and good governance. It is important, however, to recognize that a country with a weak basis for an NMES (as determined through an M&E Diagnostic) likely needs a capacity-building strategy somewhat different than a country with much stronger NMES capacity, that is, a country further along the continuum. The framework can help in devising a more comprehensive and country-specific strategy for NMES development than a generic strategy that focuses primarily on training country officials, in the absence of institutional changes and infrastructure development.
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Figure 2: Key Stages and Drivers to Reach Mature NMES Status

Level 1: No/Low M&E
- Little/no commitment to M&E—not a priority
- Minimal M&E capacity and experience
- Any existing M&E focused on accountability to donors
- Little/no training or M&E capacity building

Level 2: Early Initiatives
- Apparent political will, but no resource commitment
- Some (limited) initiatives by country to develop M&E structures
- M&E focused largely on monitoring implementation rather than measuring results
- Little/no evaluation
- Some, but limited M&E training and capacity building

Level 3: Committed Development
- Apparent political will to build results-oriented national M&E system
- Increased commitment to country ownership and use of M&E beyond international accountability
- Institutional structures being established
- Limited evaluation
- Some M&E capacity building, but continued capacity gaps, particularly in implementation and use

Level 4: Growing M&E System
- Political will and commitment to M&E and performance management
- Funding and detailed plan to develop Country-owned NMES
- Institutional structures, policies, and operational guidelines in place
- Capacity-building strategy for human resources and data development
- Evaluation recognized as important part of M&E system, but still underutilized
- Capacity gaps in implementation and use, but plan in place to deal with them

Level 5: Mature State
- Political will translates into commitment to fund M&E to needed levels
- Country-owned NMES providing needed results measurement and reporting
- Credible, reliable, and timely information generated from country systems, including at subnational level
- Evaluation a key part of the NMES
- Self-sustaining
- M&E part of the policy, planning, and budgetary cycle
- Focus on accountability, good governance, and transparency

CURRENT M&E CAPACITY IN COUNTRY

HIGH

LOW

COUNTRY M&E READINESS
NMES development in selected African countries

The framework of Figures 1 and 2 was applied to five African countries: Benin, Botswana, Ethiopia, Mauritania, and Senegal. Figure 3 shows where each country is situated on the NMES development continuum, based on an assessment of the development of each of the four NMES building blocks for each country. While the assignment of countries to a particular level is not an exact science, the relative placement of the five countries in relation to each other is likely close to an accurate depiction. A sixth African country, South Africa, is included in Figure 3 for comparative purposes. While South Africa was not a part of this analysis, there is considerable documented and public information about the state and development of South Africa’s NMES from which to determine its relative placement along the continuum.

An assessment of M&E capacity and identification of capacity gaps was conducted for each country and examined specific factors aligned with each of the four NMES building blocks. CLEAR (2013) provides a detailed discussion of the assessment’s findings for Benin, Mauritania, and Senegal.3 In examining the NMES building blocks and sub-factors, a pattern of development emerges, both within individual countries and across countries.

It would seem apparent that NMES development must start with the vision of country leadership, which provides not only adequate space to allow development of the NMES, but also demonstrates commitment to fund and develop a national M&E system. With this commitment, and often with the support or encouragement of international development partners, the focus quickly turns to training country officials to build capacity to supply M&E information. However, the capacity-building process may slow down or take considerably longer than anticipated by senior officials, largely because of the need to clarify and establish institutional arrangements, roles, and responsibilities of the various actors within the system. Institutionalizing M&E may indeed require some form of public sector reform, including national planning and budget decision making. In all level 3 countries examined, establishing the appropriate institutional...

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Figure 3: Selected African Countries on the NMES Development Continuum

1. No/Low elements of M&E
   - Essentially donor-driven
   - Mauritania

2. Some elements of M&E
   - Some NMES efforts
   - Senegal

3. Institutional elements for M&E
   - Limited implementation
   - Benin
   - Ethiopia
   - Botswana

4. Institutional elements Implementation Challenges: M&E use; data; etc
   - South Africa

5. M&E system
   - Effective, sustainable; but not static
arrangements so that the generation of M&E information is a normal course of doing business, has proven to be a lengthy exercise—and one that likely does not get enough attention.

Another important area of NMES development that clearly gets too little attention is developing the capacity to use M&E information within the particular country. The experience of the five selected countries suggests that this may be due to several factors:

- Less attention is focused on information use, including how to build necessary incentives into the system to encourage/force use of M&E information in planning, management, and decision making in government.

- A vision for using M&E information is often narrow in scope and may derive largely from the historical need to satisfy accountability and reporting requirements of international agencies (for purposes of PRSP, MDG progress, and so forth); there is valuable use but insufficient to support the broad needs of good governance and RBM.

- In the five selected countries, there have been problems with the quality of information generated by the M&E systems. These problems derive in part from fundamental problems with data in general and the need for national data development plans.

- There may be potential roadblocks arising from historical perceptions of M&E in general, and evaluation in particular, as being a threatening control-type function that serves largely to criticize. In other words, officials are often not appreciating the knowledge-generating and learning aspects associated with evaluation as a tool of the NMES.

The other development aspect shown in Figure 1 relates to various institutional elements that help enable NMES success and sustainability in a country—such factors as the existence of a national statistics agency (NSA), a systematic planning function in government, oversight bodies such as parliament and a national audit office (NAO), and others. Their development may be on a separate track from NMES development, due to, for example, the various initiatives to develop and improve the NSA in each of the level 3 countries examined. But the NSA (and data) development needs to be linked to NMES development. It must quickly be emphasized though that they are not the same thing, there is a correlation between the two. If a high priority is given to NMES development, priority also needs to be given to data development, along with associated statistical and analytical expertise. Similarly, the relationship between NMES development and other enablers needs to be recognized and fostered.

M&E capacity gaps/challenges: countries at different levels of NMES development

In examining NMES development in the five selected countries, it should not be surprising that in level 1 and 2 countries there are fundamental needs and M&E challenges across all four building blocks. But what is perhaps surprising is that, even for countries well along the NMES continuum (countries at level 3 in this analysis), there are fundamental elements of the NMES development process that still represent challenges and capacity gaps. For the three level 3 performers in the sample though, the nature of the M&E issues and challenges are more subtle. In other words, it should not be assumed that some of the fundamental capacity building—for example,
raising awareness and understanding of M&E among senior officials—is less important for these countries. Despite being at different levels of NMES development, there are still common M&E capacity challenges that each country in this sample faces. Where they likely differ is in the intensity of the challenge and appropriate intervention, given that, in some countries, there is a virtual absence or limited acceptance of M&E, while in other countries, M&E capacity development (in some form or other) has been ongoing for some period of time.

Listed below are key M&E issues/challenges observed to be common to all five countries examined:

- **Awareness and understanding of M&E roles and uses**
  - Need to raise awareness/understanding of the various roles and uses of an NMES to improve governance and management decision making,
  - Clarify what is meant by a national M&E system to increase understanding and buy-in at both the political and institutional level,
  - Weak culture and understanding of evaluation and its importance to an NMES.

- **Institutional arrangements for M&E**
  - Where M&E units exist, key capacity challenges also exist—such as inadequate resources and too few trained staff,
  - Lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities and limited harmonization/coordination of various M&E efforts,
  - Little/no institutionalization of evaluation—no systematic evaluation of government programs and policies.

- **Human resource expertise**
  - Too few officials trained in M&E, high turnover, and lack of evaluation expertise,
  - Little or no local training in M&E,
  - Too little practical M&E training and common understanding of M&E tools and methods.

- **Data issues**
  - Need to improve reliability, quality, completeness, and accessibility of data,
  - Too little sub-national data,
  - Sector data not always consistent with central data sources,
  - Too few data experts and analysts, often high turnover.

- **Use of M&E within government**
  - Potential for increasing the use of M&E in ministries and central government, but many challenges,
  - No evaluation of programs or policies and no link to policy/program development (exceptions may be internationally-funded projects).

- **Performance measurement and reporting**
  - Not enough/challenges in focusing on results (outputs and outcomes),
  - Common problems—no data to populate indicators, inappropriate indicators, poor quality data, too little analysis, timely release of reports.

- **Functions/institutions that help enable NMES development**
  - NSAS—challenges include not enough trained staff, data reliability, inadequate analysis, nor processing.
Implications for devising an appropriate NMES capacity-building strategy

It should be noted that the set of common M&E issues identified above, and capacity gaps observed across the five selected countries cover all four NMES building blocks. Where they tend to differ from one country to another is in intensity level, and therefore the appropriate responses will differ by country. In general terms, observations from the five countries suggest that a distinction needs to be made between level 1, level 2 countries and level 3 countries. This is particularly important when examining appropriate strategies and potential initiatives to support NMES capacity building.

Potential initiatives to be built into a strategy to support NMES capacity building in countries at each of the three levels is discussed in more detail in Lahey (2015), examining initiatives under four broad categories, each with a variety of specific activities:

- training and human resource development;
- advising/facilitating the institutionalization of NMES;
- supporting evaluation capacity building; and
- supporting the development of key NMES enablers.

Conclusion

Regardless of where a country may lie on the NMES continuum, it needs a strategy and action plan for NMES development if improvements are to be made—one that clearly articulates and assigns roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities along with milestones that establish expectations in terms of the pace and level of improvement. Monitoring its development and implementation in effect amounts to applying the concepts of M&E—both the learning and accountability aspects—to help grow and improve the NMES. Indeed, this is good practice at all levels of NMES development.

As an NMES matures, this level of oversight—addressing capacity gaps and identifying an appropriate strategy for building, enhancing, and modifying the NMES—implies being able to objectively assess the state, acceptance, and utilization of the current version of the NMES. This in itself could be threatening to officials aligned with NMES efforts. Nonetheless, without the knowledge of what is working and what is not (and why not), an appropriate capacity-building strategy will not be well informed nor address any issues critical to NMES effectiveness and sustainability.

Finally, it should be noted that these observations reinforce the importance of conducting an M&E Diagnostic as a prerequisite to determining an appropriate M&E capacity-building strategy. But even more, this note underscores the importance of addressing the fundamental issues of NMES development, even for countries that may appear to be further along the NMES continuum.
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